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Pg. 2 The Tribune

Police release sketch of "West-Side Strangler"



HAVE YOU SEEN THIS MAN?

Police today released a sketch of the so-called "West-side Strangler," at a special news conference at City Hall.

Police Department spokesman James Bridges called for the public's cooperation in apprehending the murderer, who has eluded the

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- 6 **Taking Possession** / Peter Lovesey
17 **A Bagdad Reckoning** / James Powell
26 **A Bit of Excitement** / Donald Olson
37 **Worth More Dead** / John C. Boland
44 **Not on the Menu** / Ed Conrow
52 **Threescore and Ten** / Margaret Yorke
58 **Unlikely Friends** / Michael Bishop
73 **The Assassination of Bulldog Dowd** / John H. Dirckx
92 **I Wish He Hadn't Said That** / George Baxt
101 **Waiting for Wayne** / Charles R. McConnell
112 **Something Very Obsessional** / Joan Aiken
119 **Silent Witness** / Barbara Owens
130 **The Small Train Robbery** / Patricia Moyes
138 **The King of Chicago** / Aubrey Davidson
139 **The Theft of the Used Teabag** / Edward D. Hoch
- 83 **Mystery Newsletter** / R. E. Porter & Chris Steinbrunner
88 **The Jury Box** / Jon L. Breen
-

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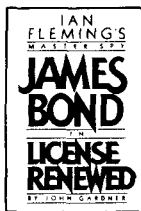
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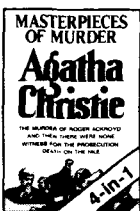
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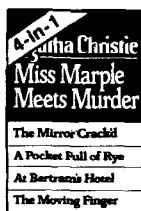
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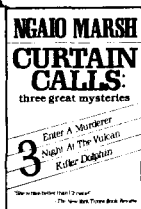
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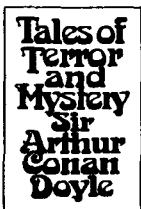
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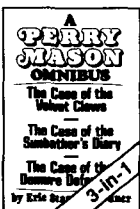
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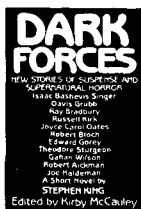
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Alfred Hitchcock



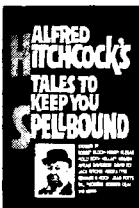
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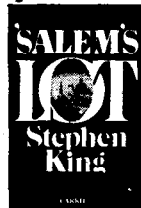
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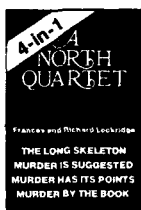
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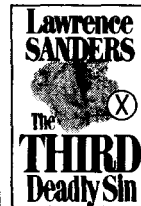
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"I suppose there is the danger of getting caught in the ratrace," Tom admitted.

"There are other dangers worse than that," his wife Anita warned him . . .

TAKING POSSESSION

by **PETER LOVESEY**

Anita Sullivan adored Cornwall. One of her most vivid childhood memories was of sitting on a suitcase in the corridor of the *Cornish Riviera* express, waiting for the first glimpse of that level band of blue that would stretch across her vision through the blissful days of the family holiday. From Exeter onward each sighting made her throat ache with anticipation until they approached Penzance, when St. Michael's Mount, the fairy castle of her storybooks, suddenly appeared in the golden light of late afternoon. Cornwall was an enchanted place.

It was on the evening of their tenth wedding anniversary that Tom told her he had been offered the position of manager of the Penzance branch of the bank.

"Darling, that's wonderful!" Anita cried out.

She flung her arms around him and kissed him. Her eyes misted over with tears of joy.

"Hold on," said Tom. "I haven't accepted yet. It's a big decision to make."

She drew back from him to see whether he was serious.

"Darling, it's the chance of a lifetime. There's nothing to decide—is there?"

Tom's face stiffened into an expression Anita had noticed increas-

© 1982 by Peter Lovesey.

ingly at moments of stress in recent years. It seemed to have started at about the time he'd been appointed sub-manager at Croydon. His lips would tighten and the muscles would tense along his jawline. He would have appeared a picture of dogged resolution if it were not for his eyes, which registered something between hesitation and fear.

Anita asked, "What is it, Tom?"

"I have a feeling I shouldn't take it. I know I shouldn't turn down a chance of promotion, but Penzance is a bit of an outpost, isn't it, right down there on the tip of the west coast?"

"It's a marvelous place," said Anita. "I was taken there year after year as a child. It's full of atmosphere and charm. I love it, Tom."

"For a holiday, yes. But this is something else. Living and working in the place is another thing altogether."

"We'll find a beautiful cottage. Property is sure to be less expensive down there than it is in the suburbs. We can look in the Sunday paper. I'm sure I've seen hundreds of lovely places advertised."

"It's only a small branch," Tom persisted. "There are fewer staff there than I have in my charge at Croydon. The salary would be slightly better, but I'd lose my London allowance. I don't know whether it's worth it."

Anita kissed him lightly and said, "Tom Sullivan, you're beginning to talk like a banker now. Didn't we always say that money isn't everything? You still believe it, don't you?"

"It isn't just the money. It's my career prospects. If they shunt me down to Cornwall, they'll forget about me. I'll see out the rest of my service there."

"What's wrong with that?" said Anita. "You've done enough since you started in the bank to earn heaps of self-respect. You've worked your way up to sub-manager at thirty-three. You've passed all those exams. You've plenty to be proud about, Tom, and I'm proud too. But let's not pretend it's been easy. We've both felt the strain at times. Now that you've earned a very good position in the bank for a man of your age, why shouldn't you take the reward of a more relaxed job in a very congenial place?"

"I suppose there is the danger of getting caught in the ratrace."

"There are other dangers worse than that. Remember that chief clerk at Epsom who had the breakdown? And Mr. Beazley's ulcers? I don't want the man I love ending up like that. I've seen the danger signs already, Tom. You need this change. Of course it won't be a

pushover, managing Penzance, but I'm sure it's less hectic than Croydon or any of the London branches."

Tom smiled. "You mean I ought to buy a set of golf clubs?"

Anita played her strongest card. "I don't see you playing golf, darling, but I'll tell you one thing. . ." She picked up a prism of crystalline quartz from his collection of mineral stones on the shelf unit and stroked her fingertip along its highly polished surface. "Cornwall has the most amazing rocks and minerals."

Tom said, "You're a devious, scheming woman and I love you." He reached for the Sunday paper and turned to the property page.

They found a buyer for their house in Croydon within a few days of putting it on the market. It was all so quickly arranged that Anita was apprehensive of Tom taking fright and backing down, but he seemed genuinely delighted. Cornwall had really taken a grip on his imagination.

They traveled down the following weekend to begin their house hunt.

They spent two nights at the Esplanade Hotel, Penzance, and visited all the estate agents in the town. They looked at more than twenty cottages that weekend, but not one was suitable. As Anita tried to explain to each of the agents, she and Tom weren't interested in places with "scope for modernization," they wanted to invest their money in a property already fitted with kitchen units, elegant bathrooms, and gas-fired central heating. Tom was no handyman, and anyway they could afford to buy at the top end of the market. But they were disappointed. Although several of the cottages they were shown had been stylishly modernized, there was always some over-riding disadvantage.

"We won't let it get us down," said Tom on the drive home. "We're learning a lot about the district. I have a suspicion that whenever new people arrive, these agents start by showing them all the rubbish they've had on their books for months. You have to sift through it before they come up with the good stuff. Let's see what they have to show us next weekend."

Comforting as Tom's theory was after a disappointing weekend, it proved to be false. The properties they were shown on their next visit were for the most part bizarre or at least eccentric by their suburban standards: a water-mill, the wing of a former monastery, and a house built into the side of a cliff.

"Haven't you anything better than this in our price range?" Tom asked.

"I've shown you everything I can," the agents replied with depressing regularity. "It's not a good time to buy."

When they got back, they found a letter from their solicitor. There was a danger of losing the sale of their house in Croydon if contracts were not soon exchanged.

They were reading the Sunday papers in bed before turning out the light when Anita gave a cry of excitement.

"Darling, this is it! Listen! 'Near Penzance. Immaculate granite-built cottage in idyllic setting, superbly restored and modernized. Inglenook with wood burner. Open beams. Luxury fitted kitchen. Two reception rooms. Cloak/shower. Spiral staircase to three good-sized bedrooms, one with bathroom en suite. Double garage. Landscaped garden. Offers invited in excess of £60,000.' "

Tom snatched the paper from her. "Is there a number to call? Yes." He reached for the phone.

"It's eleven at night," said Anita. "You can't call them now."

"Try stopping me," said Tom. He dialed the number.

Anita put her head close to the phone to try and catch the conversation.

The call was answered almost at once. Tom gave his name and apologized for calling so late.

"That's all right," said the gentle-sounding voice. "I expect it's about the cottage, is it?"

"Actually, yes. I would have rung before, but we've only just got back from Cornwall ourselves. We've been looking at cottages and found nothing suitable. When my wife noticed your advertisement, I felt I just couldn't let this chance slip by."

"I understand."

"Could you tell me more about the cottage, Mr. er—?"

"Glass. Wilfred Glass. Well, I could, Mr. Sullivan, but it's only fair to warn you that I've been fairly inundated by calls about the cottage. You must be at least the twentieth."

"I see. But you haven't sold it?"

"Not yet. Several people are coming to see it tomorrow, however."

"Tomorrow? I don't know if we could manage that." Tom turned with eyebrows raised to Anita.

She nodded her head vigorously and mouthed the word "yes."

"Wait a minute," said Tom. "I think we could make a special effort to get there."

"I'd hate you to come a long way and be disappointed," said Mr. Glass.

"I presume you won't make a decision before everyone's had a chance to see it tomorrow. I mean, if someone were to make an offer before we got there—"

"Rest assured that it won't be gone," said Mr. Glass. "There are so many factors one has to take into consideration in selling a house."

"Exactly," said Tom. "I think you could regard us reliable purchasers. As a matter of fact, I'm about to take an appointment as manager of a bank in Penzance. And we have already sold our own property."

"Yes," said Mr. Glass. "I also have in mind that I want the cottage to go to people who will treat it well. I'm very attached to the place. It's been an important part of my life. I wouldn't be leaving now if it were not that my mother is in her eighties and needs looking after. She lives in Plymouth and refuses to leave the house. But she looked after me as a child and I'd hate to put her in some old people's home. What time can you get here tomorrow?"

Tom estimated two o'clock, and that was allowing for a very early start to beat the morning rush-hour around London. There wasn't even the chance to let them know at the bank that he wouldn't be coming in. He was sure the manager would be sympathetic—he had more than once suggested Tom take a few days off for househunting. He didn't like calling in from one of the service points along the motorway, but for once in his life the bank had to take second place.

They found Stennack Cottage on the St. Just Road a few miles west of Penzance. The country here was more stark and dramatic than the outskirts of the town, with its subtropical shrubs and palms. An ancient enginehouse and chimneystack, relics of the great days of tin-mining, stood on the skyline, covered in ivy. Below was the sea, more green than blue in the brilliant sunlight.

"It's wilder than I expected," said Tom.

"I'm going to love it," said Anita.

The cottage was set back from the road surrounded by a low granite wall topped by blue hydrangeas and flame-colored montbretia. It was a solid-looking whitewashed building with a grey slate roof. Wilfred Glass was standing on the porch, dressed in faded bluejeans and navy fisherman's smock, a smiling, neat-featured man in his forties with straight, light-colored hair.

"The kettle's on the stove," he told them as they introduced them-

selves. "Come in and have some tea. What stamina you must have to make a journey like this twice in two days."

"Needs must, when the devil drives," said Tom.

"I hope the devil had nothing to do with your promotion, darling," Anita said with a smile at their host. "This is a beautiful room, Mr. Glass. And the fire as well—so welcoming."

"Not the real thing, I'm afraid," said Mr. Glass. "It's one of those gas burners, but it's quite realistic."

With the tea he offered them buttered buns, distinctly yellow in color. "Saffron," he explained. "They're very popular here, and they taste better than they look. As a bachelor, I'm very reliant on the cakeshop in St. Just. Do you enjoy cooking, Mrs. Sullivan?"

"She's marvelous at it," said Tom.

"I think you'll like the kitchen then. I had it designed by some people in Penzance who specialize in kitchens."

It was the first room they inspected when they got up to start the tour of the cottage. Mr. Glass was right: it was a dream of a kitchen, fitted with pine-clad units, a ceramic electric hob, eye-level grill, double-bowl sink with waste-disposal unit, fridge-freezer, and microwave oven. The view from the large double-window was across open fields to the sea. It was the first time Anita had seen a kitchen she would not want to alter in the least.

"Everything's included," Mr. Glass told her, "and that goes for the washing-machine and dryer and the washing-up machine in the utility room as well."

The rest of the rooms were just as impressive, with coved ceilings and subtle lighting and stylish decoration. As they came down the white spiral staircase, Anita turned to Tom and whispered, "This is the one."

"I'll show you the garden," said Mr. Glass.

"I think we've decided already," said Tom. "I believe the asking price is sixty thousand—is that right?"

Mr. Glass gave a small shrug. "I think the phrase I used was 'offers in excess of'."

"Yes, of course," said Tom. "Tell me, did you have a particular figure in mind?"

Mr. Glass put his hand to the side of his face in a gesture of meditation. "Well, it's like this. Do sit down, won't you? I've owned Stennack Cottage for seven years now, and as you have seen I've spent a lot of money getting it to my liking. I'm very attached to the place." As he was speaking, he put his hand on the chimney-breast

and moved it lightly across the surface, almost in a caress. "It's probably ridiculous, but I would only agree to sell it to people who seem to be in harmony with the surroundings."

"You can rest assured that we appreciate the place," said Tom. "We'd keep it up."

"I'm sure you would, but it's more than that." Mr. Glass turned from the fireplace and asked, "Would you think it frightfully impertinent if I asked you some personal questions?"

Tom glanced in Anita's direction. "If you want to know a little more about us, we'll do our best to oblige you."

"What would you like to know?" said Anita, more curious than apprehensive.

"First of all, how would you expect to spend your time here?"

"Well, I'm in the bank, as I explained," answered Tom. "That's five days a week accounted for, but Anita would be here. The cottage wouldn't be empty."

Mr. Glass turned to Anita. "Then you're not a working wife?"

She smiled. "I don't go *out* to work, if that's what you mean. There's plenty of work in running a house, even one so well equipped as this."

"But you have no children?"

"No children," said Anita evenly.

"There's nothing to prevent you from going out to work if you wished?"

"Nothing at all," said Anita. "But this is the style of life we both prefer. I'm not one of those women who feel deprived and demeaned by not going out to work. Our marriage is a partnership, and I do my share, and have my share of the rewards."

"A partnership, yes," said Mr. Glass, and he seemed to approve of it. "Does that mean you would jointly own the cottage if I sold it to you?"

"Of course."

"Look here," said Tom, "if you're worried about us not getting a mortgage, forget it. As a member of the bank, I can have as much as I like within reason, and on very good terms. Would you settle for sixty thousand?"

Anita put her hand on Tom's arm and said, "Tom, dear, don't rush things. Mr. Glass wants to know more about us."

"You're both being very patient," said Mr. Glass. "Now, Mr. Sullivan, I'd like to have a picture of what will happen here in the

evenings and at weekends, when you are both at home. Do you watch much television?"

"Very selectively," said Tom. "I spend a lot of time with my hobby of lapidary—stones, you know."

"Really? Well, there's plenty of opportunity for that in Cornwall. I know of several local collectors. In fact, there's a shop in St. Just."

"I prefer to find my own specimens," said Tom. "I do a lot of walking on weekends."

Mr. Glass asked Anita, "And does the partnership extend to joining your husband's expeditions?"

She shook her head. "I'm not much of a walker. I think it's important to have your own thing to do. I'm the gardener."

"I'm sure you'll do better than I have. You may even find some interesting minerals out there. *Stennack* is Cornish for tin-bearing ground. There are several mines hereabouts, some of them still being worked."

Anita said with a smile, "A pity it isn't a gold mine."

He gave her an interested look and said, "It's not impossible."

Before they left, Tom offered sixty-two thousand pounds.

Mr. Glass agreed to consider it. "I ought to tell you, I've had a considerably higher offer," he told them, "but as I explained, I want the cottage to go to the right people, and you may well be the ones. Can I phone you tomorrow?"

On the long drive back to Croydon, Anita tried hard to suppress her excitement. In her mind, she explored the cottage repeatedly for some flaw that she could seize on as a consolation in case Mr. Glass decided not to sell to them. But secretly she believed he would. She knew from the way he had looked at her that she had made a favorable impression on him, and Tom had definitely scored a hit with his stone-collecting.

"Offering silent prayers?" asked Tom.

"Something like that."

"Odd sort of character, isn't he? He seems so possessive about the cottage I can't help wondering whether he really means to sell it at all."

"Don't say that!" said Anita fearfully. "Surely he wouldn't bring people all that way if he wasn't serious?"

"Well, you have to admit it was strange of him, asking those questions."

"They didn't embarrass me."

"That isn't the point. If you want my opinion," said Tom in the voice he used in the bank, "he's spent too much on the place. Overstretched himself. Can't keep up the payments. I don't believe the story about his old mother in Plymouth. If that were true, he could easily let it furnished for a year or two, until he's able to go back."

"I don't really care as long as we get the place," said Anita.

Next morning Mr. Glass phoned and said that he accepted the offer.

Anita went out and bought a bottle of champagne.

There were no complications in the sale. At the end of July, six weeks after they had seen the advertisement, Anita and Tom became the joint owners of Stennack Cottage. They moved in a week later. Mr. Glass had put flowers on the table to welcome them.

They had purchased the curtains and carpets with the cottage, so once their furniture was arranged it was easy to settle in. Anita rather wished Mr. Glass would call on them and see how right everything looked. She was sure he would approve. She found that her thoughts often turned to him as she went about the house when Tom was at work. But he didn't come. He must have gone to Plymouth after all.

Or so she thought until one Sunday evening when Tom returned from one of his walks and said, "I believe I saw that fellow Glass this afternoon. I was looking for specimens in that old mine near Sancreed and for some reason I turned around and saw someone higher up the hill near the prehistoric site. He was looking down at me through a pair of field glasses. As soon as I turned, he ducked out of sight. I can see a long way, as you know, and I'm certain it was Glass. That fairish hair and slim figure. Damned if I know why he was behaving like that. A very odd man."

"I expect he was embarrassed," suggested Anita. "Perhaps he'd just got you in focus when you turned around. He didn't want you to think he was spying on you."

"Perhaps you're right," said Tom. "It doesn't bother me. If he started spying on *you* I'd have something to say about it. What do you think of this, then?" He took a large encrusted stone from his bag and held it to the light so Anita could see its emerald-green

surface. "Malachite. Isn't it beautiful? I dug it out of the tip beside the old pit-head up there. I think there must be more of it there."

Later that week, he told Anita, "I was right about Wilfred Glass. I had lunch today with the manager of the bank across the street. I happened to mention that I bought the house from Glass and he told me the fellow banks with them. It was just as I surmised—he overspent on the cottage and got himself into deep water. His old mother died eight years ago, so it was pure invention about Plymouth. He used her money to buy this place, with a hefty mortgage. He's living in a small terraced house in St. Buryan now."

"Poor man."

"Yes, we all have our pride," said Tom. "I understand now why he didn't want to be seen the other day."

But Tom's understanding of Wilfred Glass never went any further than that. The following weekend he went off for one of his walks in search of rock specimens and did not return. When it got dark and he was still missing, Anita phoned the police. They promised to radio their patrols and sent a young constable to the house to take down the details, but little could be done in the way of a search before morning. Anita suggested that they should concentrate the search around the old mine-works near Sancreed.

Tom's body was found at the foot of the shaft. His neck was broken. His bag of rock specimens lay beside him. It contained two pieces of malachite.

The verdict at the inquest was misadventure. Everyone was very kind to Anita. Someone came from the bank to talk about the pension she would get. The cottage became hers on Tom's death. There was no more mortgage to pay because it had been covered by an insurance policy. She decided she could afford to remain at the cottage.

Several weeks later she met Mr. Glass in the cakeshop in St. Just. She bought some bread and turned from the counter and there he was, facing her. He didn't seem at all surprised. He touched his hat and said, "How are you now, Mrs. Sullivan? What a terrible thing to have happened. I was so deeply shocked when I heard."

"Yes," said Anita.

"I know what it's like. My mother. . . But of course she wasn't young like your husband. Are you still at the cottage?"

"Yes. In spite of everything, I think I shall stay."

"I thought you would," said Mr. Glass, adding quickly, "You were the one who fell in love with it. How are you managing there?"

"Quite well, thank you."

"Everything in working order? No trouble with the electricity? It has been temperamental in the past."

"None that I've noticed."

"Oh." Mr. Glass looked thoughtful for a moment. "I'm living in St. Buryan now. Not the same at all. I passed the cottage on my way. I walked, actually."

"Perhaps I can give you a lift," said Anita because it seemed the decent thing to say.

"How kind! I'll tell you what: I'll buy some saffron buns. It will be such a treat to see what you've done with the cottage."

She was really rather pleased. He was a sweet man. It was Tom who had kept saying he was strange.

On the drive back, she asked him whether he possessed a pair of fieldglasses. "Tom thought he spotted you one afternoon at Sancreed, near the old tin-mine," she explained.

"He must have been mistaken, my dear," said Mr. Glass. "What would I be doing with a pair of fieldglasses?"

She heard him give a sigh of happiness as he stepped into the cottage. She went into the kitchen to make some coffee and put the buns on a plate. She called out, "Black or white, Mr. Glass?"

He answered, "White, if you please, Mrs. Sullivan."

She said from the kitchen, "You can call me Anita."

Mr. Glass smiled to himself. She was quite the prettiest of all the young wives who had come with their husbands to look at the cottage. In a month or two he would marry her and the place would be his again. He stood by the fireplace and passed his fingers fondly over the brickwork. Woman and home. It had all worked out according to plan, a plan as easy as falling off a log. Or pushing a man down a mineshaft.

"Q"

a **NEW** short story by

JAMES POWELL

The stone glowed wondrously, making the air about it ring like crystal. The caliph sat in silence, transfixed by the radiant jewel . . . Another gem of a story by the priceless James Powell . . .

A BAGDAD RECKONING

by **JAMES POWELL**

Know, my masters, that in ancient Bagdad there lived a wealthy merchant who owned a diamond so beautiful that whoever set eye upon it had to possess it and whoever possessed the diamond could never let it leave his side.

For this reason the merchant kept the stone in a locked casket of silver and ivory which a slave carried with him whenever the man went out of doors. Soon word of this diamond reached the ear of the caliph of those days, the usurper Selim Ali, who summoned the merchant into his presence.

In due time that worthy arrived at court with slave and casket and, hurrying across the green-and-white marble floor, he bowed low before the royal dais where Selim Ali sat, his beloved son, the prince, a young man of exceptional good looks and arrogant bearing, at his side. Nearby stood the mighty sword, the caliph's bodyguard, with drawn scimitar.

And Selim Ali said, "Merchant, caliphs cannot stay their curiosity long. Therefore, open your casket. For either I will see this incredible diamond of yours or I will name you a falsifying rogue who bears an empty casket about with him to excite his neighbors to unseemly envy."

"Oh, Commander of the Faithful," said the merchant in a mournful

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voice, "do not demand this, I beseech you. Behold my diamond and you will burn to possess it. Yet I cannot part with it while I have breath in my body. And so I fear for my life."

"Are caliphs such common stock that they lust after baubles?" laughed Selim Ali. The court joined in his merriment. Then the ruler said in a sterner tone, "Come, open the casket. What have you to fear? Am I not called He Who Respects the Law?"

The merchant bowed down again. "As you wish, Sire. But first let my slave withdraw and send away your people, even to your doughty sword. For once he has seen the stone even your faithful bodyguard might slay us both to possess it."

The caliph's eyes narrowed at this request, for usurpers know how treachery can enter by many doors. But his desire to see inside the box was great. At his sign everyone retired.

When they were alone and the merchant reached inside his robes, the caliph started up. Was it treason, then? For indeed it was a treason punishable by death to bring a weapon into the presence of the caliph. But the merchant drew out a silver key on a silver chain and unlocked the casket. Then he opened the lid.

Inside, on a black-silk pillow, lay a rose-colored diamond the size and shape of a wood pigeon's egg. The stone glowed most wondrously, making the air about it ring like crystal. The stone's beauty forced the caliph to cry out as if in pain. Then he sat in silence, transfixed by the radiant jewel.

When at last the merchant snapped shut the lid of the casket the caliph winced as though slapped across the face. As the merchant turned the key in the silver lock Selim Ali, his voice hoarse with emotion, said, "Name your price, merchant. I must have that diamond. And what caliphs must have, they will have."

The merchant bowed his head. "Sire, I have a house and a garden with a sycamore tree where the linnet comes to sing and a caravan soon to arrive laden with every spice and ointment of Arabia Felix. I have two daughters, the flowers of my old age, and a son among your officers whom I love as deeply as you do your own dear prince. All these I would give to you gladly. Yet the stone I cannot. I do not possess it. It possesses me. And so it will as long as there be life in my body."

When he heard this, the caliph tore his beard and raged and threatened. But the merchant remained steadfast. In the end the caliph ordered the man to take his casket and depart from his pres-

ence. Selim Ali could not do otherwise for he was called He Who Respects the Law.

For several hours the caliph sat, chin in hand, deep in thought, staring at the spot on the green-and-white floor where the casket had lain. Then he ordered that Omar Hasan be brought to him.

A courtier hurried down the many steps to the deepest dungeon of the castle where in the darkest corner of all lay a dank pit covered with an iron grill. At his signal, two warders unlocked the grill and pushed it aside, and from the black depths of the pit they drew out a gray-beard skeleton of a hawk-nosed man in rags, bound hand and foot with chains.

Who, having seen Omar Hasan, the Wisest of the Wise, in the glory and pride of his grandviziership, would have recognized him now? In a trice the shackles were knocked off, a hot bath was drawn, and a barber called for. Within the hour, perfumed and clad in the finest robes, Omar Hasan was blinking at the sunlight in the presence of the caliph.

"Welcome, O Vizier," said Selim Ali in a mocking voice. "When you served my late departed uncle reputation declared you the wisest in the realm. Yet surely I was wiser for I deceived you. Otherwise you would have warned my uncle about my plans against him."

"There is no wisdom in warning a doting uncle not to love his favorite nephew too much," said Omar Hasan.

The caliph cocked an amused eyebrow at the man's impertinence. Then without further ado he told of the merchant and his diamond. "Place your wisdom at my service, O Vizier," he concluded. "How am I to possess this jewel, I who am called He Who Respects the Law?"

"Think you I am ignorant of why you would be called thusly?" said Omar Hasan with contempt. "You would veil your usurpation behind the fabric of the law. And am I to aid you in your deceit? Why? Because you can send me back to the pit? That holds no fears for me. I would as soon spend the odd change of days that remain to me in that darkness as in this."

The caliph laughed with delight. "O Vizier, is not your only son one of my tax collectors? Suppose I call for an accounting from him of a sudden? Tell me the punishment the books of the law demand for the embezzlement of public funds?"

Omar Hasan's old mouth trembled with fear's palsy and he hung his head, for though the practice was illegal, all tax collectors spec-

ulated with such moneys until the strict accounting on the eve of Ramadan. "Sire," he whispered, "the punishment is death."

"And for the children of the embezzler?"

"Slavery, Sire," admitted Omar Hasan.

"You know your laws well," said the caliph. "Now let us return to the matter of the diamond."

The terrified old man bowed his head in thought. Then he raised it again and said, "Sire, it is written in the books of the law that he who blasphemes Allah by taking his own life, that man's estate shall become the property of the caliph."

Selim Ali stroked his beard. "Good," he said. "Good. When I am done this merchant will speed to death like a honey bee to the rose."

The caliph quickly set about his plan. Even though Selim Ali had taken his first wife from amongst them, the Habashites to the North, always a fractious people, had once again broken out in rebellion. Using military needs to justify himself, the caliph withdrew the armed escort from the merchant's spice caravan, allowing it and the man's elder daughter returning from a visit to her grandparents to be captured by desert bandits. Then the caliph encouraged his son to disguise himself as an officer of the palace guard and seduce the merchant's younger daughter with promises of marriage. Abandoned, the unhappy young woman hung herself from a limb of her father's sycamore tree. Then the caliph ordered that the merchant's son be given a command of horse in the war against the Habashites and that he be put in the forefront of the fighting until at last he was slain.

When the caliph's plan was two parts done, the merchant sat in his garden with the casket at his side and his wrists between his knees, ears deaf to the linnet's song. When the caliph's plan was complete, the merchant raged in his garden, cursing the jewel and his love for it. But he cursed the caliph Selim Ali most of all.

Then one day a letter from the merchant was placed in the usurper's hand. "Sire," the man wrote, "Your Highness may be aware how lately Allah in His wisdom has visited upon your humble servant many a stout blow. Human frailty being what it is, and fearing another misfortune might drive me to the final blasphemy for which there is no forgiveness, I looked about myself to see where I could have offended the Almighty. Clearly it was my insolence in not having given to His Anointed the jewel so much desired. I beg you therefore, Commander of the Faithful, to accept as a gift the diamond

of which I speak. The period of mourning for my son prohibits my going abroad to press the diamond into your hand. But should you see fit to send your worthy son, the prince, to accept the casket and a man of the law to witness its giving over, my treasure shall be yours at high noon tomorrow."

He Who Respects the Law smiled with cruel satisfaction at these words. Then, in the spirit of caution, he added his faithful sworder to the party.

The next day at the appointed time, prince, sworder, and judge of the court were ushered into the hallway leading to the door of the merchant's counting room, before which stood the slave of the casket with crossed arms. The silver-and-ivory box lay beside him on the floor.

The slave bowed low. "My Prince," he said, "this morning after the first call to prayer my master went inside, instructing me to lock the door behind him and admit no one but Your Grace. He asks but that you step inside for a brief interview. Then this legal personage shall witness the signing over of the casket."

The prince and the sworder exchanged glances. But the prince was young and well armed and knew not fear. When the slave unlocked the door with a mighty key, the caliph's son stepped inside. The slave moved to lock the door behind him but refrained when the sworder drew his great scimitar.

The prince had been in the room for scarcely a few moments when he uttered a loud cry. Flinging the slave aside the sworder burst through the door and discovered the prince standing over the body of the merchant, who was dead from a terrible wound in the stomach as if from a dagger. The judge of the court, following close behind, knelt down by the body and felt the flesh. "This man has been dead for hours," he announced. Prince, sworder, and judge as one man looked over to the barred windows and then over to the hulk of a slave who stood blubbering in the doorway.

An hour later Omar Hasan, his narrow chest heaving from exertion, was standing before the caliph again. Around his neck could be seen the red mark from the golden noose used by the captain of the palace guard sent to fetch him.

"O breathless Vizier," said Selim Ali, "forgive me for taking you away from your son and grandsons. But a peculiar circumstance has arisen." With that the caliph described the events of that morning.

"With no weapon in the room, it couldn't have been suicide, Sire," ventured Omar Hasan cautiously.

"Bah, what does that matter now?" cried the caliph impatiently. "The diamond has vanished from its casket and is nowhere to be found. Put to the question in the dungeon you know so well, the merchant's slave claims himself innocent of his master's murder and, more importantly, ignorant of the diamond's whereabouts. Find that diamond, O clever Vizier. If, by sunset, you have not placed that jewel in my hand your son's head will bounce at your feet and you will have slaves for grandchildren. Already the sun slopes toward its rest. Were I you, I would not waste time standing here."

Omar Hasan hurried away on his old legs to the merchant's house where he saw the dead man's body, which the sworder had hacked into pieces in search of the diamond and was now brought together and laid out for burial. He next examined the counting room with its secure windows and sturdy door. "What cannot be, cannot be," he mused aloud. With that he went to spend an hour in thought beneath the merchant's sycamore tree.

Then the old man returned to the palace where he found the merchant's slave sobbing on the rack. Omar Hasan took a stool and sat down beside the man and brought his urgent face close to the other's tearful one. "Forgive me," he said, "but this dark matter involves me and mine. So the truth must come quickly." He raised a finger and the warders tightened the rack a notch, dragging a breathless groan from its occupant. "Wherever the merchant went, the diamond went with him," said Omar Hasan. "And yet this morning when you were guarding the door the casket was left outside with you. How could this be?"

The slave wept. "O master, these last few days the stone's power over him had weakened noticeably."

Omar Hasan stroked his chin. Then the old man turned the slave's face toward his and demanded, "When did you first take note of this?"

The metal craftsmen's quarter was a labyrinth of narrow streets filled with noisy workshops and bright bazaars. Here and there where two or more streets met a small fountain played. Omar Hasan stopped for a moment in the lengthening shadows before the Fountain of Suliman the Wise where two days before, if he was to be believed, the slave had stood alone with the casket for the first time.

Ordering him to remain, the merchant had then disappeared up there, the Street of the Blade. But two hours later he returned by that way over there, the Street of the Goldsmiths. Suspecting he knew the merchant's errand on the Street of the Blade, Omar Hasan hurried into the Street of the Goldsmiths. He had not gone two bowshot lengths when a modest shingle over a modest doorway made him stop in his tracks. AT THE SIGN OF THE BLIND CRAFTSMAN.

Omar Hasan stepped quickly through the doorway. When he re-emerged his face was purposeful. He hurried back the way he had come beneath narrow strips of sky already touched with the approach of evening.

The old man walked as quickly as he could but he had far to go. Once he was forced into a roundabout way by a flock of sheep on their way to the morrow's market. Twice he went astray. Several times a stitch in his side made him stop for breath. By the time he reached the palace courtyard his son's chin was already on the executioner's block and that formidable personage stood at the ready, his eyes on the throneroom balcony where Selim Ali, the prince, and the mighty sworder were watching the sun slip below the city walls.

The old man tottered up the steps and into the caliph's presence.

"You brought the diamond?" demanded the ruler without coming in from the balcony.

"No, Sire," said the old man. But when the caliph raised his hand to signal the executioner below, Omar Hasan added, "The diamond is here already."

The caliph gathered his robes about him and stepped into the room. The prince and the sworder followed after him. "Speak quickly," warned Selim Ali.

"Two days ago," said Omar Hasan, "the merchant removed the jewel from its casket in secret and carried it to the Street of the Blade. There he purchased a large dagger. This he then took to a blind goldsmith who set the jewel in the pommel on the hilt of that dagger. The next day he sent you the letter. Then this morning after the first call to prayer he retired into the counting room, whose door was locked behind him. Soon thereafter he used the dagger to end a life you made such a vale of tears for him."

"But where is this dagger with the diamond in its pommel?" demanded the caliph. "Why was it not found in the body?"

"O, He Who Respects the Law," said the old man, "tell me, is it not treason and death to bring a weapon into the presence of the caliph?"

Selim Ali's eyes narrowed and he turned to look at the prince. "My beloved boy," he commanded, "give me the dagger you plucked from the dead man's body."

The prince hesitated until the sworder raised his mighty scimitar. Then he swiftly drew the dagger from the folds of his robe. The caliph groaned at the sight of the jewel again. Bedazzled by the diamond, the sworder faltered. In that instant the dagger's blade found his heart and came out again. The bodyguard fell dead at his royal master's feet.

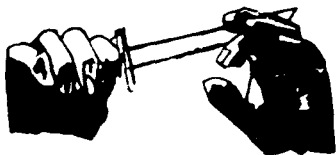
Flourishing the dagger, the prince leaped out onto the balcony and vaulted over the balustrade. In the courtyard below, another dagger thrust emptied the saddle of the captain of the palace guard. In a twinkling the prince was galloping through the palace gate.

The prince fled northward from the city to the Habashites, his mother's people, who hailed him as their leader. He rode at their head when they pillaged the loyal villages, carrying a mysterious dagger with its hilt masked with black silk in his waistband.

At last the day came when the caliph had to move against his own son. The trumpets sounded and the main gates of Bagdad were thrown open. With a haggard and world-weary Selim Ali at its head, the army rode out beneath a forest of bright banners and like a river of silver it wound its way across the desert. And in the train of that army, among the victualers, armor menders, jugglers, and storytellers who have followed those fateful caravans from time's beginning, there strode a hawk-nosed old man with a bright eye and a quick step. For Omar Hasan had seen the jewel glitter on the dagger pommel too, and would never rest until he possessed the stone.

The old man smiled at the horizon. It was glorious to be alive. When the winds of civil strife trouble the waters, a fisherman, if he be wise and singular of purpose, must surely bear away a prize.

Is this not so, my masters?





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a **NEW** short story by

DONALD OLSON

Darlene Potts' molelike routine never varied: subway to work, subway home, a solitary meal, a book or TV, shampoo, bath, and bed. She began to wonder if nothing was ever going to happen to her. Then Raleigh Ames came into her life . . .

A BIT OF EXCITEMENT

by **DONALD OLSON**

After her parents divorced and she flunked out of business college, Darlene Potts said goodbye to Elkhart and moved to Chicago, took a room in a residential home for Employed Young Ladies, and landed a job so easily that for weeks she enjoyed the delusion that the move to Chicago was going to change her whole life.

It didn't. For the simple reason that it did not change her personality, drab to the point of non-being, nor her appearance: long skinny arms and storklike legs, stringy, dun-colored hair, a bone-white complexion, eyes that were neither blue nor gray. Add to this a shrinking awkward timidity that did nothing to salvage her from a life of social obscurity.

The job was as a file clerk at Universal Chemtronics, Inc.—UCI—a vast complex of buildings on the south side of Chicago employing close to three thousand workers. During her first year at UCI, Darlene was one of the faceless ciphers relegated to Siberia, the popular name for the small building where historical data was entombed in long rows of filing cabinets. The work was dull, repetitive, and unexacting. At the end of the year Darlene was promoted to assistant filing clerk and transferred to the main office building.

It was hardly a promotion worth celebrating even had there been anyone to celebrate with. Darlene remained as friendless at UCI as

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she had in grade school, high school, and business college. She had never been to a party, never been out on a real date. Her molelike routine never varied: subway to work, subway home, a solitary meal, a book or TV, shampoo, bath, and bed. She began to wonder if nothing was ever going to happen to her.

For years nothing of consequence did, aside from her having advanced to the position of head file clerk. The only duties distinguishing head file clerk from the others was that she was entrusted with the keys to the confidential data files and all requests for material from Siberia had to be channeled through her. Her salary was still barely adequate to cover her weekly living expenses now that she had moved from the residential home for Employed Young Ladies to a dingy apartment closer to her work.

That her life remained totally uneventful compared with those of her fellow employees might not have infected Darlene with more than a mild, despairing sense of her own worthlessness had it not been for those collection boxes circulated almost daily among the various departments on behalf of employees who become ill, had operations, lost a loved one, got married, had a baby, retired, etc. Most workers dropped fifty cents or a dollar into the kitty whether they knew the recipient or not, expecting themselves to be on the receiving end sooner or later. Being obliged to fork over even a negligible percentage of her wages—and over the years it amounted to a considerable sum—to people she scarcely knew, and when she herself was unlikely ever to be eligible for *their* donations, began to irk Darlene, yet not to contribute would be considered very bad form.

This resentment, petty as it was, fed upon itself, grew out of all proportion to its cause, and became the focal point for a growing sense of frustration and bitterness.

Until one day, having finished her brown-bag lunch at her desk and with nothing to occupy her mind until one o'clock, Darlene did something rather extraordinary for one who was seldom credited with having any imagination. With a vague idea of amusing herself, Darlene slipped a sheet of paper into her typewriter and wrote across the top: COLLECTION FOR SUSAN SNYDER IN HISTORICAL RECORDS WHOSE MOTHER DIED UNEXPECTEDLY. RETURN TO DARLENE POTTS, FILING DEPARTMENT. She taped the sheet of paper to an empty stationery box, thought about it with a grin, and was about to toss the whole thing in her wastebasket when something made her pause. Whatever *did* happen to Susan Snyder, she wondered.

In the fifth grade, as part of a school project, Darlene had become penpals with Susan Snyder, a schoolgirl in Santa Clara, California. They had exchanged snapshots and a handful of letters before Susan unaccountably stopped the flow, most likely because Darlene's letters were too boring to bother answering. The letters had meant more than anyone could have imagined to shy, friendless Darlene and their loss had left her with a feeling of rejection more acute than what she felt from the neglect of her too-busy father and alcoholic mother. Even now Darlene still carried a snapshot of pretty red-haired little Susan in her handbag, romantically imagining that someday they might become reacquainted, even close friends.

With a sudden flash of resentment at life's unfairness, Darlene carried the box with her on her way to the ladies lounge, casually dropping it on one of the empty desks in Cost Accounting. Good joke. Later, back at work, she forgot about it until just before five when, as she was tidying her desk, Madge Bessey, one of the other file clerks, ambled by and dropped the box on Darlene's desk.

"Who's this Susan Snyder?" Madge inquired. "I never heard of her."

Grasping for an answer, Darlene mumbled something about Susan being a friend of hers from Elkhart. "I recommended her for the job in H.R."

Nervously curious and with a faint tremor of guilt, she waited until she was alone and then opened the box. With mounting astonishment she counted out sixty-five dollars and fifty cents! She sat for a good ten minutes in stupefaction as to what to do with the money. She had never expected the joke to be taken seriously! Or had she? Now there was nothing to do about it but slip the money into her bag, toss the box in her desk drawer, and go home. —With a feeling of fearful exultation at the thought of her own audacity.

That evening, instead of warming up the beans and frankfurters, she got dressed up and went alone to the Blue Peacock Restaurant for dinner. On Saturday she spent the remainder of the money on a pretty white frilly blouse with rhinestone buttons, not at all her sort of thing. The thought of having pulled a fast one on her fellow employees tickled her. Naturally, she hadn't the slightest intention of ever repeating the hoax.

Not, that is, until the day Allene Maxwell in the Credit Department came by Darlene's desk and flaunted a diamond engagement ring under her nose. Brooding until lunchtime, Darlene then typed

another appeal and sped the box on its way. This time Susan Snyder was getting married.

Despite her qualms of conscience, Darlene realized there was small chance of anyone becoming suspicious. Not when the personnel turnover among the scores of workers was as constant as it was and when Historical Records was in a separate building, with herself the only one permitted to requisition material from that particular limbo. Moreover, by then the wicked little thrill she enjoyed in playing the game had become as necessary to her as a department-store counter is to a kleptomaniac. In succession, Susan Snyder underwent an emergency appendectomy, her grandmother's house burned down, her father died, and she broke her leg on her icy back stairs.

"That poor girl," lamented Madge. "Talk about bad luck. I don't even know her but I put two bucks in the box."

"Yes, it's really awful," agreed Darlene. "It's been one thing after another for her this year."

That evening, gazing at the fading snapshot of Susan Snyder, Darlene tried to imagine what her little lost friend must look like at twenty-nine. The money itself she had put to a rather singular use. She had bought herself, at different times, a red wig, some glittery earrings and a jangly charm bracelet, a pair of spike-heeled shoes, and various articles of apparel in splashy greens and golds which she imagined a grown-up, vivacious Susan might favor. It was all part of an absorbing game and it provided Darlene with her first passionate interest in life. She rarely any more considered the risk involved, and when she did it merely added a spice of excitement to the game.

That fall Susan Snyder suffered a miscarriage. Darlene bought a pair of green contact lenses.

Who knows how long the game might have gone on if at that point Raleigh Ames hadn't come into Darlene's life—by way of Accounting, which adjoined her own department. Over the years two or three of the least attractive male nonentities in the office had asked Darlene out. Once. By then, however, she had abandoned whatever dreams she might once have cherished of ever finding a male companion to rescue her from the fate to which she was by now resigned. Certainly in her wildest dreams she would never have expected a man like Raleigh Ames to be more than peripherally aware of her existence. Raleigh Ames was a tall sexy-eyed bachelor with the sort

of face and build that belonged on TV. That he had actually invited Madge Bessey to dinner was in itself hard to understand, Madge having a sunny disposition and sweet manner but being almost as plain and no younger than Darlene.

"So what did you talk about?" Darlene asked her the following morning.

"Believe it or not, about you mostly."

"Come again?"

"No, I mean it. Raleigh said you remind him of a girl he used to know in New York. I gather they were very close. He said he didn't go for glamor girls."

"Thank him for that," retorted Darlene sardonically.

"He said he can't get over how much you remind him of her. He wanted to know all about you—if you were married or had a boy friend, how long you've worked here and who your friends are."

Darlene took all this with at least a pound of salt, but then when Raleigh Ames started dropping by her desk for a few moments of small talk with increasing frequency she couldn't help feeling a quivering excitement whenever he approached. That he could possibly feel any real interest in her, however, she refused to believe. No matter how much she might resemble that mysterious girl in his past.

Raleigh happened to come by just before five on the day Darlene had circulated the collection box for Susan's "miscarriage." She quickly stuck the box in her desk drawer and tried not to appear flustered as Raleigh, wearing that devastating smile of his, perched on the corner of her desk.

"Friday, thank God," he remarked, lighting a cigarette.

"Should I cheer?" replied Darlene, who had cultivated a snappy, cynical attitude as a defense against her incurable shyness.

"Shouldn't you?"

"All Friday means to me is another dreary, endless weekend."

"Maybe what you need is something to prepare you for it. Why not have dinner tonight?"

"I suppose I will."

"I mean with me."

Darlene's mouth didn't exactly fall open but her face gave that impression. "Are you serious?"

With a grin he glanced at his watch. "Not until Monday morning. How about it?"

Darlene couldn't have been coy if she had known how. "I'd love to."

"Terrific. I'll pick you up at seven."

With trembling fingers Darlene reached for a pencil. "I'll give you my address—"

"Don't bother. I know where you live."

Darlene was too overcome to be surprised. But then she supposed Madge must have told him. Could it be remotely possible he *was* that interested? Did miracles actually happen?

She was so tremulous with anticipation, she started to walk away from her desk a few minutes later without opening the collection box. Then, remembering, she went back and hastily tore it open. She removed the cash without at first noticing the piece of white paper tucked in among the bills. When she did, she unfolded it with an air of mild curiosity. Then her heart quickened as she read the typed message: *How long do you expect to get away with this racket?*

The rapture created by Raleigh's invitation evaporated on waves of panic. Disgrace and ruin were implicit in those few typed words. Dear heaven, how could she have been such a fool as to blind herself to the danger of continuing this idiotic game? What could have possessed her, she who would never have dreamed herself capable of such folly? That the message was unsigned only added to her dismay and terror.

As she rushed home to spend the next hour and a half frantically trying to make herself as attractive as possible for Raleigh, she tried to persuade herself that the message was only a joke. Why hadn't the author of it simply gone to Management with his discovery? Or had he—or she? Would Monday morning bring disaster?

Her hair! If only she had known Raleigh was going to take her out she could have left early and gone to the beauty parlor—not that any of them had ever succeeded in doing anything with those limp, colorless strands. For one desperate moment she toyed with the idea of donning her Susan Snyder wig and green contacts. But she had never worn them in public and they would only lead Raleigh to suspect she was some sort of kook.

Charmer that he was, he had the grace to compliment her on her appearance and couldn't have been more flatteringly attentive as they drove to one of the better neighborhood restaurants where Darlene felt herself to be the envy of every other woman in the room. The shock of finding the message in the collection box melted so swiftly under the warmth of Raleigh's attention that for an en-

chanted hour or she she could almost believe it was indeed only somebody's idea of a joke.

Until, still wearing that beguiling smile, Raleigh destroyed the magic with a simple question:

"It didn't spoil the evening for you, did it, Darlene?"

"What didn't?"

"My little note," he said disarmingly. "In the collection box."

Poised upon that peak of enchantment, Darlene for a split second was incapable of making the connection.

"You did find it, didn't you?"

This time Darlene's mouth actually did fall open. "You?"

"Me. Lucky for you."

He laughed openly at her look of consternation. "You were lucky, you know. If someone else had discovered your little hoax you'd be in big trouble. Though I'm afraid Management might use a stronger term than hoax. Swindle? Racket? Larceny?"

Darlene tried to speak, lost her voice, then managed to whisper, "How did you know?"

"I was interested in you, Darlene. In everything about you. How you lived. Your friends. Oh, yes, I did my homework."

Darlene pressed a cold hand to her burning forehead. "But *why*?"

A touch of irony altered the character of his smile. "I wish I could say it was your charm and beauty, my dear, but it wasn't. Although I was quite prepared to wine and dine and seduce you if necessary to get what I want."

"What *do* you want?"

"Nothing much, really. Just your cooperation. And thanks to your putting yourself in a vulnerable position, I don't think we'll have any trouble coming to an agreement." Lowering his voice and adopting a businesslike manner, he laid it before her.

"As head file clerk, you have access to the confidential files at UCI. Those files hold certain materials of interest to me—or, more precisely, to those who employ me. I'll let you know exactly what data I'm interested in. You'll remove this material from the files and convey it to me. When I'm finished with it you'll return it to the files. Don't worry, there's no risk—nothing like the risk you've taken with your collection boxes."

At that moment it wasn't so much the awareness, humiliating as it was, of how shamelessly he had deceived her that left Darlene feeling sick at heart as the horror of what he was proposing she would do—betray the trust the company had placed in her for all

these years. The Susan Snyder game had never in any way affected her loyalty to her employers.

"I couldn't do that," she replied. "Never. I wouldn't."

His smile acquired a shadow of menace. "Of course you will. If you don't, the very least you can expect is to lose your job. More likely you'd be facing criminal prosecution. You must realize that what you've been doing is illegal. Criminal."

Had she realized it? Possibly, in some vaguely hypothetical sense. Yet even that awareness hadn't been powerful enough to prevent her from playing the game.

"Now finish your brandy," he said, "and we'll drive back to your apartment. And get down to business."

The following day as Darlene unlocked the confidential files and removed with nervous haste the material Raleigh had specified, she knew that by no trick of the mind could she pretend *this* was a joke. She scarcely bothered glancing at the data itself—technical material meant nothing to her. She slipped it into a plain envelope and returned to her desk.

Shortly after five, Raleigh met her beside his car and casually offered her a lift home. Instead, they drove to his apartment where, leaving her in the living room, he disappeared into his study. A few minutes later he returned and handed the envelope back to her.

"I suppose you photographed it," she remarked dully.

"I did. And tomorrow I'll photograph this material." He placed in her hand a description of the items he wanted her to procure for him.

"How long is this to go on?" she asked plaintively.

"Until those who hired me have everything they require."

She regarded him with contempt. "You're a spy. An industrial spy."

"Yes, we are, aren't we?"

"How dare you say I—"

"But you're now as guilty as I am, my dear. So in case you should get any ideas about telling anyone what we're up to, just keep in mind what will happen to you. Management might possibly be somewhat lenient in regard to your Susan Snyder hoax but I assure you they'll take a very dim view of your part in *our* little game."

He needn't have threatened her. It had not occurred to her to confess. If she were to suffer no more than disgrace and the loss of her job she would never confess. That would take a degree of courage

she didn't possess. All she could do was to follow his instructions and hope it would be ended.

At the end of the month she began to wonder if it would ever be over—until finally she could bear the uncertainty no longer. One afternoon as they drove toward Raleigh's apartment she said: "I must know. How long is this to go on?"

"Not much longer. Another week should finish it."

"I hope I'll never see you again after that."

He chuckled. "Don't count on it, Darlene."

She glanced at his profile, hard and cold as a face on a coin. "Surely you're not planning on staying at UCI. Not after all this."

"No, and if I were you I wouldn't plan on staying there either."

"I've no choice," she replied bitterly.

"Of course you have. Well, let's say you have and you haven't."

"Meaning what?"

"I've been giving some serious thought to your future, Darlene. You've had a lot of valuable experience at UCI. Good work record. Highly trusted. Excellent credentials. If you left you'd get a good reference. How would you like to work for me permanently?"

A shiver passed through her. "No, thanks."

"The pay would be a lot better than what you get at UCI."

"I'm very happy there. Or I was."

"Was. Right. Do you really think you ever will be again? You'll know better than to play your stupid little game again. Why did you do it in the first place?"

"I don't know," she replied honestly. "It just happened."

"Nothing just happens. I'll tell you why you did it. You were bored. You wanted a bit of excitement in your life, something to break the monotony. And you wanted—well, call it revenge."

"Revenge?" She pretended not to understand, but at the same time she was astonished at his skill in penetrating her motives.

"You know what I mean. Against the other, the people in that office whose lives seemed fuller than yours, more exciting. Every time you pull one of those confidential files I'll bet you get the same sort of thrill you got from circulating those boxes for a gal who doesn't exist."

"That's crazy."

"Not really. Think about it. Be honest. I did you a favor, Darlene. You can tell yourself you've hated every minute of doing what you've

been doing for me, but you're only kidding yourself. You've enjoyed it, it makes you feel alive."

She turned her head sharply away from him, refusing to answer. He laughed. "I've got another contract coming up. A big one. If I could get you inside the plant it might facilitate matters considerably. Give it some thought, Darlene."

"I don't have to. I'm not interested."

"Then get interested," he said harshly. "I need you, Darlene. So you don't really have a choice."

The smugness of his tone brought all her seething resentment to the surface.

"All right, I admit it, Raleigh. Yes, I do feel that little thrill you talked about. I'm scared to death every time I take something from the files. I'm so scared my hands shake and I begin to sweat and my heart feels as if it might explode. And I enjoy it, yes! It makes up for all those years and years of nothingness.

"The only time I felt like that before in my life was when you asked me to dinner that first night. I really believed you were interested in me—in *me*! I actually was dumb enough to believe it was finally my turn to—to *live*. You can't begin to know what I felt like all through dinner that night. I felt *wanted*. And then you destroyed it. You said if it had been necessary to wine and dine and—and seduce me to get what you wanted you'd have done it. Oh, Raleigh, that's what you *should* have done! You could have had anything you wanted from me—I'd have gone anywhere you asked, done anything you wanted. But you thought you'd found an easier way to get what you wanted from me. That was your mistake, Raleigh. You had no right to hurt me like that. Now I'd rather die than ever see you again."

Until she spoke those words she had no idea what she was going to do. Perhaps if he hadn't taken one hand from the wheel to light his cigarette she might not have done it. She moved instinctively, without forethought. Her eyes saw the oncoming truck in the other lane and her hand shot out and grabbed the steering wheel, twisting it violently to the left. Car and truck collided broadside before the car spun out of control and overturned across the center of the highway.

Madge came to see her in the hospital, and handed her the flowers and an envelope. "We took up a collection. You can buy yourself something pretty."

Darlene smiled. "How sweet of you all. Thanks."

"We sent flowers to Raleigh's funeral, of course. Oh, Darlene, everyone was so stunned. You never told me you were seeing Raleigh after that first date."

Darlene turned her head aside on the pillow. "Please. I'd rather not talk about it, Madge."

"I understand, honey. Gee, you were lucky though. To come out of that awful accident with only a broken arm and a few bruises. It's a miracle."

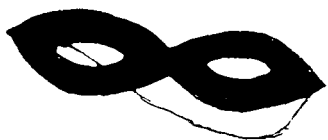
The miracle, thought Darlene, was that no one had discovered the contents of the envelope in her bag and raised embarrassing questions.

A month later she was back at her job. She tried to tell herself that the entire dreadful experience had been a valuable lesson. Only somehow it didn't work. She was only kidding herself. The boredom she felt was now intolerable, almost like a chronic physical pain. The days seemed endless and relentlessly the same.

At last, although she knew she was playing with fire, she could hold out no longer. One day she typed the letter, affixed it to the box, and sent it on its way. The heading read: COLLECTION FOR SUSAN SNYDER IN HISTORICAL RECORDS WHO IS LEAVING THE END OF THE WEEK. RETURN TO DARLENE POTTS, FILING DEPARTMENT.

With the proceeds, she bought herself a bus ticket to New York. She packed her bags, closed up her apartment, and left Chicago for good. In New York she registered at one of the better East Side hotels. The desk clerk regarded her admiringly. A bit on the skinny side, but there was something about her, a combination of frailty and strength, a certain air of mystery and allure. Besides, he was partial to redheads with green eyes.

"Nice to have you with us," he murmured as he rang for the bellboy, and then, watching her as she moved away on her spike heels, he called after her: "Enjoy your stay, Miss Snyder."



a **NEW** short story by

JOHN C. BOLAND

When Marley said he would be staying at the hotel permanently, the Albion's desk clerk told him that would make Mr. Skarudin deliciously happy. The ferretlike Mr. Skarudin owned both the Albion and the even more disreputable Congress, as well as a dozen or so flophouses and a handful of massage parlors. He was known to have said that nobody who was completely human frequented any of his establishments . . .

WORTH MORE DEAD

by **JOHN C. BOLAND**

Marley moved into the Albion Residential Hotel because they were tearing down the Congress. The Albion would have been a good candidate for the brick pile itself. Six stories of turn-of-the-century black-weathered stone; two wings, a hundred and forty rooms, battlements from which rain cascaded in sooty torrents. It had been a music hall in the Twenties, a whores' bivouac in the Fifties. Now duffers like Marley scuffed the curled-linoleum hallways on dying afternoons and gray mornings—next year's ghosts, next week's.

Since arriving at the Albion three days earlier, ordering the moving men on the placement of several large trunks, two peeling suitcases, and a dozen cartons of old detective and science-fiction novels, he had listened at odd hours for the whispering crunch of stone rubbing on itself and settling, and when he was satisfied it wasn't there to be heard he told the desk clerk he would stay permanently. That, said the clerk, would make Mr. Skarudin deliciously happy. Mr. Skarudin owned both the Albion and the Congress, as well as a dozen or so flophouses and a handful of massage parlors. He was

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known to have said that nobody who was completely human frequented any of his establishments.

"He's sore," explained Marley's across-the-hall neighbor, Fox Cutter, "'cause the last guy had your room ducked out owing rent. Can't say I blame him, either, dealing with scum like Skarudin. When I get ready to go, it's gonna be *swoosh*, like a thief in the night."

Skarudin never showed his pointed nose around the Albion. The desk clerk doubled as manager, and anything he couldn't handle Mr. Skarudin's pet Weasel saw to. The Weasel drove a white Rolls with fur-covered seats. Fox Cutter said you could figure the Weasel carried a knife in his garter belt.

On an airless night two weeks after he'd moved in, Marley woke up to the sound of grinding.

He climbed out of bed, scraped around the dirty linoleum till he found his shoes, then went out and banged on Fox Cutter's door. When the white bald head appeared, Marley jerked a thumb at the ceiling. "Real racket."

Cutter nodded. "Keeping me awake, too."

"The dump is eating its own bricks."

"It'll stop."

"One of these nights it won't. The whole pile's going to tumble down. Or they'll have to knock it down." Like the Congress, he thought. He squeezed a fist tight and hit the air with it.

"Come have a drink," said Cutter, who liked company even in the middle of the night. Marley stepped into the tight, dim room. The taller man pulled a bottle of gin from under the washbasin. He poured Marley a stingy shot into a coffee mug. "These old buildings creak and groan all night," he said. "Last place I lived did too."

"I'm not talking about *creaking and groaning*," Marley sneered. "I mean the sound the damn bricks make as they pull loose. *Cracking*. Then *grinding*, as they settle back. Sooner or later—"

"You know what does that?" Cutter helped himself from the bottle. "It's the heat going out. By ten, eleven o'clock, the bricks have cooled off from the day. That's when they separate from the mortar."

"Like I say, sooner or later—"

"When I lived over at the Savoy, it was the same thing. Bigger place, though, so it went on longer. It got on my nerves. Fact, I was just as glad when so many folks moved away they had to close it down."

Marley looked at the bottom of the cup, wondering if he could get another drink.

Cutter poured a dollop that wouldn't have drowned a roach.

"I guess you know places like this are worth more dead than alive," Cutter said. "You take taxes, upkeep, figure it's all been depreciated twenty years ago, and it'd probably *pay* Skarudin to close this place down like the Congress."

Marley was starting to decide Fox Cutter was a know-it-all. "Maybe they just want to let it go to pot."

"That's what I'm telling you. Figure how cold last winter was and what fuel-oil costs, this dump probably can't make enough to feed the rats. That's the way the system works. The system don't care nothin' about the little guy."

"That's one gripe I ain't got." Marley left it deliberately vague.

"What's that?"

"Rats. Never seen one in six years at the Congress. Maybe you know the reason for that."

"Like I said, Skarudin can't afford to feed 'em." Cutter chuckled at his own good humor.

When that hiccuping subsided, Marley heard the subdermal grating. "That sounds like it's right behind the wall!"

"That's because the walls are brick. Good sound conductor."

"You got an explanation for everything. If we all get buried alive, you gonna explain that?" Marley regretted the outburst right away. He'd blown his chance at another drink.

The grinding went on longer the next night. And the one after. It was getting closer to something. More insistent. After a second nearly sleepless night, he persuaded himself to break the silence between himself and Fox Cutter.

"I could tell you things," Cutter said.

The slob who ran the Quik As A Lik diner tapped the counter in front of Marley. "You buyin' or just thinkin' about it?"

"If I thought about it, I wouldn't *be* in this hole," Fox Cutter said.

So they had to leave the air-conditioning and hit the August pavement. Flies swam madly around the garbage in the gutter and hungry ones sallied forth to see if the old men were ripe enough.

"I sure told him," Fox Cutter chuckled.

Marley swallowed his reply. "What about Skarudin?"

"You stick around one place long enough, you get to understand things. How the world works." Fox Cutter nodded to himself.

"That figures," Marley said.

"For guys like us, it works to screw us at every turn. We paid our

dues, but it was all time down the hole. They tell you the reward's ahead, so you work your tail off. But what they got in mind ain't a reward."

Marley grated his teeth. From the old railroad man down the hall he'd heard that Fox Cutter spent most of his years living off women and handicapping three-legged ponies. When he got too ugly for his last lady friend, she died.

"You listening?"

"Yeah," Marley said.

"Well Skarudin gets paid by the state, four bucks a day for the folks without pension. Hey, you aren't on the dole?"

Marley clenched his fist, pretending he held Cutter's ropy neck. "Get to the point."

"He gets a hundred fifty bucks to bury the charity cases."

"So?"

"So it's gotta be cheaper to bury 'em than to give 'em rooms."

Marley thought about it. "But the room money's steady."

"A smart man could have it both ways. Bury 'em under phony names so the rent keeps comin' under their right names. Betcha the welfare rolls right now show lotsa dead people living at the Albion." Cutter squinted at the sky. "*Damn!* I bet he's collecting for you *twice*, once at the Congress, once here. Could have folks' checks at the Congress sent to post-office boxes. No one in welfare cares what hotels get knocked down."

"Plus pensions," Marley said.

"What?"

"*Pensions*. If Skarudin buries folks under phony names, the pension checks would keep coming."

"Ah, I don't know," Cutter protested, looking for a fault because he hadn't thought of it first. "I don't know about that."

You don't know for nothing, Marley thought.

But then Cutter spotted two bits lying in the shadow of a tomato can and counted himself a winner again.

"*Maybe* pensions, too," he said.

A rust-rimmed hearse was loading. The cargo wore an undershirt and striped shorts and was unbelievably white, mouth pulled wide and frozen as if calling the flies home. Marley stared in detachment. Fox Cutter analyzed the situation. "Ticker quit. Look at those fingernails. Blue as my—"

"Yeah," Marley interrupted.

In the elevator, Cutter punched six instead of five.

Marley reached out and Cutter knocked his hand down.

"Hey," Marley said.

"Patience," Cutter said. At the sixth floor he led the way off to the left, far into the north end of the building. At a door numbered 621, he jerked his thumb. "It's either us or the guy working the desk. He's busy, and we're here first." He jiggled the doorknob, twisted, and it wasn't locked. He bolted for a scabrous dresser. Marley closed the door.

The bed was a tangle of yellow, reeking sheets that trailed onto the floor.

Cutter found what he wanted in a metal wardrobe. Two virgin bottles of cheap vodka. "Henry never went thirsty," he announced, tucking a bottle under each arm.

So that night Fox Cutter slept the sweaty cluttered sleep of the drunk and Marley lay awake as bricks grated and sandy mortar sighed out of the joints like dirty water.

It was like clawing, he thought.

Something trying to reach him.

He fell into a horrible dream. Skarudin and the Weasel crouched in Fox Cutter's room, naked, brick dust and mortar powdering their pale bodies. Skarudin, chewing Cutter's tattered shoulder, looked up and laughed at Marley through sharp teeth. He and the Weasel retreated toward the closet, where a jagged round hole gaped in the plaster. The two diners—funny how he had never noticed that they both looked ferretlike—backed into the hole and pulled Cutter after them. For a while Marley heard scrambling as they burrowed deeper into the building.

He woke up in a sweat, afraid to breathe.

"What was Henry's last name?" he asked Cutter the next morning. Already the pavement breathed fire back at them. A blonde teenager with dirty knees perched on the back of the bus-stop bench, her blouse skewed. Cutter stopped to gape, one hand scrubbing his chin. The girl offered a smeared moue.

Cutter looked away. "Henry—Wade, that was it. What do you care?"

"Wondered. Who owned the hearse, do you think?"

"Feeleys, same as usual. Henry was a county case. Feeleys gets the county cases. Cremates 'em. It can't be any worse than today. You think you sweat when you're cremated? Go out with a *hiss*?"

He chuckled, sneaked a glance over his shoulder at the girl. They headed down Eastern Avenue.

"Papers'd be on file," Marley said. "Death certificate, cremation report."

Cutter whistled a robust few bars of "Mack the Knife."

Marley said, "It'd be easy enough to check if they burned Henry under his own name."

"Couldn't care less." Cutter resumed whistling.

"Suppose Skarudin and Feeleys are in cahoots," Marley insisted. "Maybe you're right about Skarudin getting the money."

"Don't doubt it. *And* the pensions."

"So?" Marley looked hard and saw a glint of fear in the side of Cutter's eye.

"So?" Cutter said.

It was too hot to walk across town. Marley squandered seventy-five cents and rode the bus, transferred at Cross Street, and got to the courthouse breathless and faint, head swimming with diesel fumes, heart fluttering like a leaf. They were almost all at lunch. He had to make up a cock-and-bull story about Henry being a cousin before the girl would turn the motorized trays for him and look for Henry Wade's card.

His dream had told him how it was, Marley thought. Skarudin's eating us alive.

She came up with a card. "Henry Wade, born 2-23-09 in Keokuk, Iowa." She stumbled over Keokuk, making it sound like an Egyptian mummy. "Deceas'ded August 13. Dr. Augustino signed. Feeleys Mortuary performed a cremation yesterday. It don't look like you can claim the body." She gave a shrug with her eyebrows, tucked the card back, and left Marley standing.

The Weasel was hanging around the lobby, a fashion plate in a white textured suit and straw hat. He was playing with his watch chain and telling sex jokes to the motheaten kid at the desk. The kid was barely smiling.

Marley turned around and went back out into the noon simmer. The street was empty. He walked down to the alley and saw the Weasel's white Rolls. Edging along the passenger side, he fingered the finish, inspected the furry white seats. The steering wheel was wrapped in fur that had turned gray under the Weasel's caress.

Marley fumbled out his penknife and opened the blade. He scur-

ried back along the car, digging the blade into the paint. Then he stuffed the knife away and fled in terror.

Fox Cutter stayed in his room with Henry's vodka for the next two days.

On a sizzling morning when his feet seemed to stick to the pavement, Marley hiked as far as Needle Street, where a narrow building with a pink fake-stone front wore a Feeleys Mortuary sign. He unrolled the same line about his dead cousin and a tiny man with robinlike eyes showed him the paperwork, which said it had cost three hundred and seventy dollars to dispose of Henry Wade. There it was, Henry Wade.

"The county paid for it?" Marley said. His heart had fallen. He'd known it after the records hall, but he'd held a watery hope.

"Paid for everything but the suit."

"What suit?"

The berry-black eyes looked at his throat, a bird's businesslike contemplation of a meal. "What's his name, the one with the Rolls Royce? He said Mr. Skarudin thought Mr. Wade should have a suit for the occasion. He brought over a check."

"Skarudin paid for a suit?"

"And we burned it up. Silly, isn't it?"

He walked back to the hotel with loose-feeling bowels. The Albion sat stinking in the sun, dirty windows blazing back at the white sky. Tonight it would grind and settle, eating them alive.

In the fifth-floor hallway, horror rising, he banged on Cutter's door. *It's worse than we thought!* he wanted to scream. *No one's to blame!*

Through the door he heard Cutter's drunken snores. They sounded like the stirring of the things in his dream.

"Q"

DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 596th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine. It was written by Ed Conrow, who, when asked for information about himself, offered the following as "nothing spectacular." We beg to differ.

He flew 68 combat missions over Europe as an armorer/gunner with the Eighth and Twelfth Air Forces during World War II. He joined the U.S. Treasury Department in 1945 and in the Fifties was assigned to Treasury Intelligence in New York, investigating waterfront racketeering and fraud.

Mr. Conrow's investigative work took him "all over" before he retired to Phoenix, Arizona, in 1974 with his wife of 36 years, "a delightful lady, a New York University graduate who was an Air Corps photographer during World War II and later a teacher." They have two grown children, both living in California, and "that's about it except for our male cat Bijou who is twelve."

Now meet Mazie, sassy 62-year-old waitress at a truckstop diner named Lulu's. Mazie favors arch-support shoes and blue eyeshadow. How Mr. Conrow's travels might have inspired her creation is food for thought . . .

NOT ON THE MENU

by ED CONROW

My feet hurt something fierce. I've got a headache that's the granddaddy of them all and getting worse every second. Mazie this and Mazie that.

Just look at that sad sack over there—the single sitting in the booth set up for four. "I want Number Three!" he practically screams at me. "Hop on it, sister, 'cause I ain't got all day! Don't burn the

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toast, and make the eggs scrambled fluffy and not laid out flat like a manhole cover!"

Have a nice day yourself, buster.

All the regulars call me Mazie and that's the handle I got stuck with. I ain't no raving beauty. I favor arch-support shoes and blue eyeshadow. Some combination, huh?

Sixteen years I've been taking orders here at Lulu's. Taking orders, shooting the breeze, giving advice to the lovelorn, putting up with Jasper who used to be married to Lulu, and wiping the crumbs and catsup drippings off the tabletops.

Lulu died in '71 and ever since Jasper took over, the place has sort of gone downhill. Yeah, we still get the regulars and the hello-goodbye-never-see-you-again tourist trade. I tell you, if Jasper would only lay off nipping at the gin bottle he keeps hidden in the vegetable bin and stop hitting the vanilla extract and get his head screwed back on maybe things would be a little better around here.

Big deal, that Jasper. Wish the slob would shave. Once a week would be a small miracle. Him in his dirty T-shirt and cigarette butt hanging out of the corner of his mouth. Pretty fast with his hands too. And he wonders—or pretends to wonder—why he has such a turnover with the help.

Why don't I pack it in? Listen, kiddo—with all the complaining I do I can't just go out and get another job like that. I ain't no chorus-girl type. Not any more leastwise. Besides, if I left Lulu's at least ten thousand truckers from Saint Joe to New Orleans to Frisco would all die of broken hearts. Well, maybe not all of them but at least the one who runs in from Vegas—he's a pretty simple sort and not too choosy.

Well, anyway, in spite of Jasper and my aching feet I manage to do pretty good on tips because I try to give the customers the one thing they want the most—fast service.

Come on, Jasper, get the lead out. What kept you with my Number Three? What? Don't wave that spatula at me, kid, or I'll deck you for sure.

Here you are, honey. Number Three. Piping hot. I put an extra slice of toast on for you. Told the cook to scramble up three biggies instead of just two. Big hunk of man like you can use an extra egg and slice of toast. Here, let me fill your cup again. Can't take any more? One cup is enough? You got the smarts, handsome—this stuff will take the paint off the side of a barn. Sure, I knew you were a trucker. You like my blue eyeshadow and what time do I ditch this

ptomaine palace? How'd I like to zip over to St. Louis with you? Now there's an idea.

Sorry, buster, got to break it off. Guy over by the door is giving me the high sign. Eat up and enjoy. Don't leave any nickels. Surprise me with quarters.

Here's the menu, handsome. How's the weather? Why lookee there. Sun's shining to beat the band. Looks dark over Clover way though. You come from Clover or did you stumble through a car wash?

Big deal. Never answered me. Him with his hair all wet and his jacket rain-spotted. Just grunted. Land's sake, I don't know what ever happened to common courtesy and civility. Just look at all the mud he tracked in with his size fourteen brogans. Soon as Rafael gets in he's gonna have a mop-up job.

I *hear* you, I *hear* you, Jasper—stop that bell-banging and caterwauling. What do you mean my b.l.t. on rye is all set, you lunkhead? You forgot the tomato. You know, that soft red thing you slice up razor-thin. What in the world's getting into you? I tell you, Jasper, we'll all be on welfare if you don't pay more attention to business. How would I make the payments on my charm-school lessons if this joint was closed up?

There, there, I know, honey. Your head hurts something awful. Just give the tomato here—I'll fix it. *No*, not your head—the sandwich, I mean.

Here you go, Miss. B.l.t. on rye and hot tea with lemon. Him? You mean Jasper? Naw, he rants and raves all the time—part of his therapy to overcome being too nice. Say, I like your outfit. You look swell in brown. I like your hairdo too. Salon de Paris? In Phoenix, huh? You from Phoenix? Beautiful nailpolish. Raspberry Frost? Real nice. Okay, if you need anything else just yell.

Come on in, honey. All by yourself? Mind sitting at the counter? All the booths are busy right now. Over there—down at the far end. Make yourself comfortable and I'll swab the deck for you. You come from Clover way too? Must have been caught in a cloudburst. Don't worry, honey, those polyester suits dry in a jiffy.

Jasper, lay *off* that stuff. Drinking gin and eating a raw onion. What in the world is getting into you lately? Every time I see you you're nipping away at something. Cough medicine? You big baboon, do you think I was born yesterday?

Here's a cup of java, honey. Like it black? Lighten it up, huh? Pretty smart. Kills the taste. What's a good-looking guy like you

doing in a place like this? Never seen you before. Notice you're married. Too bad. If you were single I'd introduce you to Miss b.l.t. over there. Isn't she a knockout? Of course she looked at you. Who wouldn't? Honey, you've got better looks than some of those ho-hums you see on TV.

You want the Number Seven—hamburger medium-well with cheese. Any onion? Better yet don't ask for onion. Refill? I'll have your order in a flash, handsome.

Oh boy, the phone. I'll get it, Jasper. I said I'll get it—you get this order.

Lulu's—Mazie here. Why, hello, Thelma—what's new? Whoa, not so fast. On the twelve o'clock news, huh? Well, I'll be. What's this world coming to? Yeah? Yeah? Yeah? Yeah? Listen, I gotta hang up—Jasper's giving me the evil eye. Of *course* he's potted again. See you at the Circle meeting Thursday night. What? Well, I don't know right now. Maybe I'll wear my Disneyland shirt and red slacks. So long, Thelma. Go back to sleep, dearie, get all the beauty sleep you can.

Jasper, what do you know? There was a bank robbery over at Clover. Little over an hour ago. Lone bandit took all of twelve hundred dollars.

Jasper, you look a bit green at the gills.

Jasper, I've told you a thousand times—three-minute eggs are just that and nothing else. I'm not screaming, Jasper. Well, let's see if I can palm these disasters off on the good Reverend Thomas.

Here you go, Rev. Yes, I agree—probably more like three times three. Tell you what—if you don't like them they're on the house. See you in church, Rev. By the way, just in case you decide to leave a tip and as long as I have to tithe, leave me at least ten percent, huh?

Rafael, where in the world have you been? Look at all those dishes stacking up. Some break—give you fifteen minutes and you take an hour. Out back in your van reading a girlie magazine, huh? Rafael, cut it out, no smooching in front of the customers. Of course I like it, my little hot tamale, but at my age I just can't take all that heavy breathing. Go on—those three booths in back are in pretty sad shape. The rest rooms will need a going over too.

What, you didn't like the eggs, Rev? But you ate them. Waste not, want not? Okay, Rev, no sermons. Save it for me on Sunday.

Now what was that? Jasper, you making funny noises again? *What* noises? That bleep-bleep sound. What did you say, Rafael? It sounded

like a beeper went off? What's a beeper? Oh, one of those signal things. Well, I'll be.

Well, durnit, just look out front, Rafael. Look at all those cars. It's Sheriff Dooley and two of his deputies. What in the world are they doing pawing all over that red Chevy?

Anything else, Miss? I hope the b.l.t. was okay. It was, huh? Good. But don't order the same thing if you come in again, Jasper never gets lucky twice. That nailpolish really gets me. Raspberry Frost. La-di-da-da.

Phone? You can use the one in the back. You'd rather not, it's too noisy? Tell you what, why don't you use the one out front. There, see it? Out next to the highway.

Sheriff Dooley, my lands—what are you doing these days? Catching any biggies? Busting up any nickel-and-dime poker games at the old-folks home? Me? Sassy? Of course I respect the badge. Why, only last week one of the school teachers out on playground duty saw you raise you know what 'cause some third-grader dropped a candy wrapper on school property. Why ain't you out catching the bank robbers? You don't say! Well, I'll be. Getaway car—the red Chevy. Did I see who got out of it? Now, Lem Dooley, you think I got nothing to do but look out of that dirty window and see who gets out of a red Chevy?

Sorry you asked? Well, you needn't get huffy. How'd I know about the bank robbery? Thelma gave me a call. Park your rear, Sheriff, and I'll have some hot java for you in a sec. Nothing too good for a man who squeezed into a second term as Sheriff by sixteen votes.

Rafael, stop that. Stop breathing on my neck, there's just so much a sixty-two-year-old heart can stand. And stop that whispering. Speak up, boy.

A gun? You think he has a gun? You were cleaning up the booths and you happened to look sideways and you saw his jacket open and the butt of a gun?

And you found *what* in the men's room? This piece of brown paper—a bank wrapper—with fifty ten-dollar bills? First National Bank of Clover. Five hundred dollars.

Who has the gun, Rafael? Of *course* I won't look straight at him—I'll just take a little peek. My lands, you don't mean that brute with the wet hair and jacket. Why, he tracked in all the mud—Rafael, it's him, he's the bank robber. He's the guy who took the bank for twelve hundred dollars. Rafael, play it cool. If there's any shooting,

pull in that skinny neck of yours. Don't try to be a hero. I wonder who went into the men's room when I was too busy to notice.

Here's the java, Sheriff. Sorry I got sidetracked for a minute. Drink up. Nothing's too good for the man behind the badge. Uh huh, you don't say? Abandoned the getaway car down near the creek outside of Clover, hailed down a traveling bible salesman from Fort Lauderdale, and gave him the deep-six about thirty miles back. You got make on the car? Oh, right. The red Chevy.

Well, what's this bank robber look like, do you know? Well, I'll be. Two witnesses said he was big and fat and one thought he was wearing a ski mask and one thought he was wearing a rubber gorilla face. It gets worse? Another witness said he was well dressed and handsome. You don't say. All the bible salesman remembers was this guy waving his arms out on the highway with a big pistola in one fist. Oh, you think maybe he can supply a better I.D. once the lump behind his ear goes down and he stops hearing bells.

Bet there's a lot of mud down by that creek bed outside of Clover, eh, Sheriff Dooley? Thought so. Rained in Clover too, didn't it? Sorry, Sheriff, gotta shake my tail. Looks like Number Seven wants to settle up.

Well, how was it, honey? That's good. Glad you didn't want any onion. Let's see—two twenty-five out of a ten. Do you have anything smaller? No? Mm—well, okay, here's your change. Have a nice day. Come and see us all again.

Rafael—Rafael! The guy with the gun's getting up. Looks like he's ready to leave. Tell Sheriff Dooley. I'll try to stall him.

Come on, my little Tex-Mex, that's it. Dooley, you big overgrown lunkhead, play it cool—don't stare at him like that. Put your eyeballs back in or you'll blow the whole thing. Stick that red nose of yours back in the java.

Let's see. Eggs sunnyside up with ham and a pineapple slice, hash browns, and coffee. Three thirty-five. Another ten spot, huh? Naw, just jawing at myself. By the way, how'd you get all the mud on your shoes? Been in any creek beds lately? You been wearing a ski mask today? What about a gorilla—?

Oh, man, if looks could kill. If he pulls that pistola out on me old Mazie's gonna hit the deck like greased lightning.

Look at that Sheriff Dooley go. Three hundred and twenty pounds of steer-wrestling muscle. Stand clear, Rafael. Gimme that coffee pot, I'll belt him one. Don't shove a woman like that, Mister, or I'll

give you the blue bejabbers. Grab him, Dooley, he's getting away! Hit him with something, Rafael!

Lordy, just look at that Tex-Mex pounding away at him with his girlie magazine. Take that, Mister—and that—and that! Jasper, git out here and help us! Put the cuffs on him, Dooley!

What? What's that he's waving in your face? He's a *what*? No, I don't know what a Customs Agent I.D. looks like!

Lordy, what's all that caterwauling coming from out front? Well, for land's sake! Well, what do you know?

Naw, honey, I usually go home at three P.M. But when I heard you TV people were coming over to get a first-hand on-the-spot interview I said to myself—

Rafael, stand on my left. You too, Jasper. Come on over on my right. Naw, I don't think your eyes are too bloodshot. My, those lights sure are bright. What's that? When I see the red light blink on, you want me to start talking.

There it is. Okay—first off I want to say I'm sorry for hitting that very wonderful Customs Agent with the coffee pot. If Rafael hadn't spotted the gun under his jacket it never would have happened. And, well, how was I to know this Customs Agent was making a patrol down by the creek bed when he came across the abandoned getaway car? And on the front seat he found a paper bag with holes cut out for eyes, nose, and mouth.

Some witnesses. Ski mask, gorilla mask, ha ha. What's that? When did I figure the good-looking guy in the polyester suit was the bank robber? Actually, I thought he was an F.B.I. man—at least until I saw the stack of tens he had when he paid for his Number Seven.

Caught him outside in the parking lot, didn't she? Well, to tell the truth I had it in the back of my mind that the beeping noise came from her purse. Imagine a good-looking girl like that with such a nifty hairdo and Raspberry Frost nailpolish being an F.B.I. man, er woman, er person. You should've heard that little sweetiepie yelling "Freeze." And seen the way she gave him a karate chop. Ten-dollar bills were flying all over the parking lot. Jasper, watch your hands—we're on the TV.

Why, hello, honey. You sure do have nerve coming back here a second time. Here, sit by the window. B.l.t. on rye toast. Hope Jasper is up to it. Say, I read all about it in the papers. You mean you weren't tailing the bank robber at all—just stopped off here to grab

a bite and your beeper went off? And the bible salesman came to and gave a good make on the bank robber, and they beeped you 'cause this is the area you work?

Land's sake—you mean you spotted him right off, especially when you noticed Sheriff Dooley snooping around the red Chevy out front? And that's why you asked if there was another phone around here, so you could call your office and— You like my nailpolish? Thanks. It's Heavenly Rainbow. Naw, I'm kidding. I call it that 'cause it turns green when I clean the coffee urn.

Say, tell me—did your boss foot the bill for another pair of pantyhose after you ruined yours wrestling that clown down on the gravel out front? No way, huh? Ain't that just like a man?

Coming, Jasper. Sure, I hear you banging the bell—keep your shirt on!

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a **NEW** short story by

MARGARET YORKE

Ellen had bought Maurice's birthday gift, a thick wool maroon dressing-gown, with the jobbing gardener in mind, for Maurice would never wear it.

We're delighted to present a second story by Margaret Yorke, further evidence of her special gift for portraying old people and long-held resentments . . .

THREESCORE AND TEN

by **MARGARET YORKE**

In the morning of her husband's seventieth birthday, a Thursday in September, Ellen Parsons rose as usual at seven o'clock. She went quietly into the bathroom, careful as she moved about not to disturb Maurice, who still slept, a straggle of grey hair falling across his pale, domed forehead.

After she had washed and cleaned her teeth, inserting her dentures, three stark molars on a pink plate, Ellen, in her woollen dressing-gown, went down to the kitchen and put on the kettle. While it boiled she laid the table in the dining room: blue-and-white Cornish crockery, honey and butter, on a linen cloth.

This was the last meal at which she would sit across the table from Maurice, and she hummed under her breath as she finished her early routine. When the kettle boiled, she made the tea and carried the tray upstairs, setting it on the table between their twin beds. After it had had time to draw, she poured out two cups, with two lumps of sugar in Maurice's. But nothing sweetened him.

"Tea, Maurice," she said and took her own into the bathroom, where she dressed out of his sight.

Maurice did not reply, but she knew he would now sit up, yawn,

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showing his bare gums, belch, and drink his tea in gulps. She would return to the bedroom to do her hair in time to pour his second cup. When he was ready to rise, she would be downstairs cooking the bacon and egg he was able to eat daily without putting on weight.

She had decided to kill him one Sunday morning a year ago in church, hearing the words from Ecclesiastes: *To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: a time to be born and a time to die . . .*

I have not lived yet, Ellen had thought.

Her mind ranged back over the years of her marriage to when she first met Maurice. Her father, a widower, had died after a long illness through which she had devotedly nursed him. Maurice, then junior partner in the firm of solicitors acting for her father, had called at the house to advise. He said she should decide nothing in haste and counseled her to keep the house for the present.

Ellen, weary from the strain of her father's illness, was glad to agree. She set about the neglected garden and washed curtains and paintwork indoors. Maurice watched both her and the house revive under this treatment. One day he brought her some violets—another time, a book of poetry. She looked forward to his visits—he had a sweet smile.

Soon she exchanged one form of bondage for another. She and Maurice, after their marriage, continued to live in the large old house on the edge of the village, and here they still were. Their only child, a daughter they named Priscilla, was born. Priscilla, against her father's wishes, had married a young farmer and the couple had at once emigrated to Australia. Priscilla wrote happy letters every fortnight and sent snapshots of her four children. She urged Ellen to come out for a visit and see her grandchildren, but Maurice wouldn't go himself and absolutely refused to permit Ellen to go without him.

Maurice required his life to be smoothly organized. The smile that had once charmed Ellen was seen rarely after marriage. He insisted that meals be punctual to the second. A small girl should be seen and not heard. Arguments were not allowed. And only Maurice's opinions might be expressed.

He controlled the money Ellen inherited from her father, allowing her small amounts for personal needs. During their short engagement Ellen had anticipated long talks with him such as she had enjoyed with her father, and discussions about books they might

both enjoy—Dickens and Trollope—but Maurice read only legal tomes and the biographies of the eminent. He enjoyed silence.

Priscilla, as a child, was allowed no parties, and her friends were not encouraged to visit the house, though Ellen was able to welcome them while Maurice was at the office. Later, as Priscilla grew older, if any dared to enter the house while he was there they were subjected to such an interrogation about their lives and views that few risked a second encounter. It was not surprising that Priscilla escaped as soon as she could. The only guests Maurice invited were business acquaintances he took to his study for brandy. Once a year his partners and their wives came to dinner.

Ellen's fragile links with other people grew weaker after Maurice retired. If she invited anyone to tea he would sit scowling and looking at his watch, finally leaving the room with some remark like "See that dinner's on time, Ellen," humiliating her.

But now all this would end. The resentment that had simmered for so long had at last boiled over. The house was hers, and all the money—both what she had inherited and what Maurice had made—would be hers too.

The days of our age are threescore years and ten. . .

Ellen had read the words many times. Maurice had now ended his seventieth year; she had made her plans and at last the time had come to carry them out.

The post that morning brought nothing from Priscilla. She had never yet forgotten her father's birthday; something must be on the way. What a pity Maurice would not now receive her card, Ellen thought, buttering her toast.

She gave him her own present when he had finished *The Times* leader, a thick wool dressing-gown. She had bought it with Ben, the jobbing gardener, in mind, for Maurice would never wear it. Maurice thanked her without enthusiasm, saying he would have preferred camel color to maroon. Ellen knew that cheerful Ben would like maroon better.

Breakfast over, Maurice went to his study and Ellen set about her chores. After she had made the beds and tidied round, she went into the garden and cut three large ripe summer squash; they would get hard and woody if left on the plants and Maurice had pointed them out to her the day before. She carried them into the house and down the flight of steps leading to the cellar. The door was locked and bolted. Taking the key from a hook beside the door, Ellen unlocked it and laid the marrows on a stone ledge inside. Strings of onions

already hung on the walls but otherwise the cellar was quite bare. It was dark, lit only by a tiny window high on one wall.

The squash deposited, Ellen left the cellar; she closed the door, which opened outwards, but did not lock it.

Now it was time to prepare for her weekly shopping expedition. Every Thursday she made the trip into town, her one outing in the car, for Maurice decreed that once a week was sufficient. She backed the car out of the garage until the corner of the rear bumper and the exhaust pipe were exactly opposite the cellar window which, seen from outside the house, was a narrow slit a few inches above the ground, the glass protected by chicken wire which was now rotten with age. There was a blackened area caused by exhaust fumes on the brickwork around the window for the car was always reversed into this position.

But today Ellen reversed too far and broke the window. She smiled as she switched off the engine and uttered a shriek.

Maurice had heard the crash. He came storming out of the house to inspect the damage. The corner of the bumper had gone straight through the rotten wire and the glass—Ellen had practised the maneuver until she could have done it blindfold. She stood wringing her hands and apologizing meekly while being scolded. If Maurice had not heard the impact, she would have found him to confess, for, as she knew he would, he immediately went to discover what had happened in the cellar, into which most of the glass had fallen. She followed him.

Automatically he reached for the key and found it missing from the hook.

"You've been down here this morning, Ellen," he accused.

"Yes, Maurice, I brought those three marrows in. You told me to cut them."

"You didn't lock the door. How many times must I tell you everything?" he exclaimed, opening the door and striding angrily inside.

Ellen had never seen the point of locking the cellar, but now she was glad it was one of Maurice's rules. In an instant she had slammed the heavy, close-fitting door behind him, turned the key, and thrust the bolt across.

For a moment she leaned against it, panting, her heart pounding. It had been easy! She had spent hours devising the perfect scheme, thinking of first one plan and then another. Now she could truthfully say, when she was questioned, that she had forgotten to lock the

cellar door after taking in the marrows and had returned to do it. How could she have known Maurice was in there?

She hurried up the stairs before he had time to begin beating upon the door. In a few minutes she had started the engine of the car, reversed it still closer to the wall so that the exhaust was tight against the broken cellar window, and left it to run, leaving the choke well out. Maurice always insisted she warm the car up thoroughly before driving away. The rich mixture filling the cellar with fumes would make Maurice unconscious very quickly. A mere five minutes in a closed garage with a large car could prove fatal, she had discovered during her researches in the public library, and Maurice was due for a much longer diet of fumes from their medium-sized sedan.

She left the car and walked away, for there were sounds coming from the cellar, shouts and cries, and she could not stay to listen. There was nothing Maurice could stand on to reach the window far above his head. He would go to the door, but he would not be able to break it open.

Ellen went to the garage and fetched the bottle of distilled water kept there. She returned to the car, not hurrying, opened the hood and topped up the battery, concentrating on the task, ignoring the cellar.

There was no sound now apart from the car's engine, which was beginning to run unevenly as it warmed up. She pushed in the choke, and, the battery dealt with, put away the distilled water and closed the garage. Maurice would never allow it to be left open when the car was out for fear of passing thieves, although it was behind the house and couldn't be seen from the road. Then she went into the house. She could scarcely hear the car now, its engine purred so sweetly.

She went to her sewing-box and took from it the wad of leaflets about traveling to Australia hidden there for weeks under her embroidery. How should she go? By boat, she thought: a large and luxurious liner which would call at exotic ports on the way, and first-class, of course. No one came to the door while she turned the pages of the brochures. The only regular callers were the milkman and the postman, and on Tuesdays the cleaning woman. Few door-to-door salesmen or solicitors bothered to come to the isolated house at the end of the village. Occasionally she rose to listen to the car. It still ran, not stalling. At last she decided she had waited long enough and she went out to it.

It had got rather hot and the temperature of the water showed high on the gauge. Ellen moved the car forward. She laid a sheet of slate that normally covered the kitchen drain against the broken windowpane to keep the fumes inside. No sound came from the cellar.

Then she drove to town and did her shopping.

When she returned more than an hour later, Ellen removed the slate and replaced it over the drain. She backed the car up to the window again and left the engine running while she unloaded her shopping. Finally she opened the garage doors and drove the car inside.

It was now time to prepare lunch, and for once it would not matter if the meal was late. How wasteful, she reflected, peeling Maurice's usual two medium-sized potatoes and slicing runner beans fresh from the garden. She had made his favorite pudding, cream caramel, the day before: a birthday treat. She put the grill on for the chops.

Soon she would have to start looking for him. She could spend some time searching the house and garden, and then go up the village to inquire if anyone had seen him. She needn't think about the cellar until later, much later. Perhaps she need not think of it at all, until she told the police he was missing. That was the part she dreaded: finding him. But by then he would have been dead for a long time; most certainly by now he had been dead for hours. He would not have suffered for long, but his hands might be torn and bruised if he had clawed at the cellar door.

She dished up the meal and put it in the low oven. Then she went upstairs to wash and do her hair before calling him, as she always did.

She didn't see the sleepy wasp among the bristles of her tortoiseshell hairbrush as she raised it to her head. She felt only the sharp, searing stab of the sting above her temple.

Ellen grew giddy almost at once. Three years ago she had been stung on her arm, fainted, and recovered only because Maurice had been there, seen her cyanosed face, and called the doctor instantly.

This time, he could not save her.

“Q”

a short story by

MICHAEL BISHOP

We're pleased to welcome Michael Bishop to our pages. The author of eight novels and many short stories, most of which have appeared in science-fiction or fantasy publications, Mr. Bishop has just received the Nebula Award in the novelet category by the Science Fiction Writers of America for "The Quickening," published in Terry Carr's anthology, Universe 11 (Doubleday).

"Unlikely Friends" contains nothing of a science-fiction nature. It is a story the author describes as "a decidedly oblique detective story." But it is a detective story nonetheless—about a pilgrimage, parenting, and perspective . . .

UNLIKELY FRIENDS

by **MICHAEL BISHOP**

You *had* to wonder about them, Sheila told me. It wasn't natural, their relationship. That was why she had called, synapsing the gap between her trailer court in Barclay and my brownstone in wicked old Hotlanta. It was up to me to see that Paul's life didn't go monkey-mash sour before his twentieth birthday. I owed him *that* much, didn't I?

"Listen, La, I'm on a case, and it doesn't sound so godawful serious as all that. My rent falls due—"

"You're Paul's father," Sheila reminded me, although I hadn't forgotten. Something fishy was going on, she insisted. She was scared for Paul, but she couldn't do anything because she didn't move in the circles this high-tone old geezer named Samuel Halterman moved in, and Paul hadn't talked to her since catching her *in flagrante interdicto* with a Man Not Her Husband while still the

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Lawful Wedded Wife of Jack Whitman, Paul's most recent stepfather. At chance meetings downtown—the bank, the post office, Foster's Barbecue Hut—her own son cut her dead. Made her feel lower than spaniel puke.

"He's not any fonder of me, La."

"Fonder? Why, Jimmy Bevilacqua, he hates your ugly face."

"Right. Perfect reason for me to butt in. What a break for Paulie, you ringing me up like this."

As in the Old Days, La and I went back and forth. Eventually she hit me with a shopping list of my fatherly faults, failures, and cop-outs. Her voice quavered through the line the way a phonograph record sitting lopsided on a turntable wobbles the music coming out. When I finally tossed in the towel—"All right, all right, I'll look into it"—she whooped in triumph, then damn-near splintered my ear bones cradling her receiver.

Collect call. What else?

Just what I needed, another nonpaying case. (Put "case" in quotes.) Plus a chance to rub raw the sensitivities of some of the disapproving Barclavians who Knew Me When, to open lots of old wounds with Sheila, and to rile up an overbearing teenager who chiefly remembered me for hurling beer cans and pounding on walls.

Not to mention the chance to meet this Halterman character, a retired architectural mucky-muck from New Yawk New Yawk. Upon him, according to La, Paulie had fixed the spillover of his grateful-puppy-dog affections. Or something. Anyway, they were now an every-evening item around Barclay, as inseparable as collards and cornbread.

I drove down early Tuesday in my twice-repossessed-and-reclaimed Trans Am and stopped three miles outside of town at the Ocmulgee Pulpwood Company, which was where Paulie worked. The fastest way to lay La's overimaginative worries to rest, it seemed to me, was to talk to the boy. If I could catch him alone for about twenty minutes, I could probably figure out his business with Halterman, reassure my ex by telephone, and scoot back to Atlanta without ever putting leather to a Barclay sidewalk.

The Ocmulgee Pulpwood Company looked like a military installation. A chain-link fence surrounded a pine copse cleared to reveal a prefabricated office building, a warehouse, and an elevated conveyor belt for dropping wood chips into open railroad cars. You had to stop at the gate to tell the guard what your business was.

The guard was Prescott Seeley, a hefty-bellied joker from my senior class at Barclay High. In intramural scrimmages twenty years ago he had lined up against me in the defensive-end position, from which, with Good Old Boy affability, he would taunt me about my lack of success in getting around him for a pass. A couple of weeks into the regular season, as he was sashaying back to the bench after coating my nose with quicklime for the third time in as many plays, I bounced my helmet off his noggin and got suspended from the team. This morning, though, my shades, beard, and motorcap concealed my identity from old Prescott—right up to the moment I opened my mouth and told him I had to talk to Paul.

"Paul don't want to see you, Jimmy. Ain't you got some other reason I should let you through?"

"I'm his daddy. That's good enough."

Squinting skeptically, Prescott told me where to find Paul—he was moving wood chips from an asphalt lot into one of the warehouse bays—and passed me inside.

I parked in front of the corrugated office building, then walked between it and the conveyor-belt tower to the chip lot. Engine noise led me right to Paul. Periodically wiping his forehead with his sleeve, he was driving a dirty yellow tractor with a dented lift-scoop. His hair was cut so short his blond temples looked naked. Eighteen years old? Hell, an elongated ten or twelve was more like it. It was odd watching him do a man's work.

"Paul!" I shouted, waving my cap.

He saw me, and his face changed. An expression of concentration gave way to one of mad-dog meanness. He wheeled his tractor around and drove it grumbling and popping straight at Dear Old Dad.

I retreated through a narrow corridor between the fence and the warehouse. Paulie kept coming. When he was as close as I was going to let him get, he dumped a scoop of wood chips at my feet, spilling them out toward me like the sawdust guts of a disembowled Trojan Horse.

You can't sneak past my defenses with a wave and a shout, he was telling me. Eight years ago I had deserted his mama and him, and the times I had come back with money and toys didn't square our accounts, not by any reckoning he was willing to consider. Well, I had known that, but I hadn't expected him to try to bury me under a pile of miniature pine shakes.

Paul backed his machine away and contemptuously returned to work. I followed him around the lot trying to make myself heard

over the noise, but he ignored me so expertly I began to feel like an invisible, and inaudible, man. I was less than a ghost to this boy. His hatred wiped me out of existence.

At which point it occurred to me that Sheila's reading of Samuel Halterman's role in our son's life was all wrong. He wasn't a pederast or a leech, this dude from Up East. Hell, no. He was an immensely attractive substitute for Jimmy Bevilacqua. Yeah. He was a Father Figure.

As soon as that thought hit me, I stopped trying to make Paul acknowledge my presence and hightailed it out of the oily prison yard of the Ocmulgee Pulpwood Company. As I drove through the gate on my way to the River View Trailer Court, Prescott Seeley touched the brim of his hat.

"That's bull, Jimmy. Halterman ain't no father figure to Paul. You been reading too many *Psychology Today* articles."

"Just why is it bull, La, tell me that."

"Because Paul's already *got* a father. You don't need a father figure if you've already got a father."

"Do you mean me?"

"Like hell."

"Who, then? Jack?"

"Of course I mean Jack. Paul loves that man. They used to hunt, fish, do everything together. Why you suppose he took me messin' around with Gene Darby so hard?"

"But Jack's not always around." No truer words. Jack Whitman worked oil rigs off the Louisiana coast, and his duty tours sometimes kept him on a platform for as many as ninety days on end. These protracted absences had led La into temptation, just about the only place a man could ever hope to point her with her full compliance. "That's why you had to telephone Hubby Numero Uno, remember?"

"You're trying to weasel out of this and go back to Atlanta."

"Sure I am. It looks pretty innocent to me."

"Nothing looks innocent to you."

"Sheila-love, what the hell do you *want*?"

"Talk to this Halterman fella. I'm afraid to. Talk to him, look at him hard, see if you can find out what's happening to Paulie."

It was a real mercy to get out of Sheila's trailer, which reeked of dirty diapers and day-old bacon grease. I headed through town to the resort where Halterman spent alternate afternoons working as

a starter on the golf links. Orange spider lilies and smoky-blue hydrangeas lined the marshy ground behind the first tee. Coming down the path from the clubhouse, I quickly caught sight of my prey.

Halterman was chatting with one of the men in a mixed foursome. He was wearing grey plaid trousers with a yellow stripe, perforated loafers with tassels, and a short-sleeved yellow jersey with grey piping. His face was long and deeply creased, his hair silver and plentiful. He looked like a wartless Honest Abe, if Abe had somehow managed to jog past his assassination and into the fullness of his senior years. I liked his features, but not the way he was slapping scapula, tilting back his head, and cracking jokes through the brilliant off-white baleen of his dentures.

Dapperness, I decided, but no dignity.

Two groups went off before I could get up the grit to approach him, and even then I didn't know exactly how I was going to play my hand. I didn't want to waste time on ploys he'd see through P.D.Q., but neither was I sold on simply introducing myself as Paul's daddy and taking it from there. My son, no doubt, had already set out rat poison around my reputation. So I flashed a phony identification under Halterman's nose and told him I was a Georgia Bureau of Investigation agent looking into various illicit drug connections in predominantly rural counties.

"I was told in town, Mr. Halterman, that you know a little something about the young people hereabouts."

"Oh, really. Who told you that?"

"I can't divulge my sources. Is it true?"

"No, I'm afraid it isn't."

"You know Paul Whitman, don't you?" I had almost said Bevilacqua for Whitman. Three years ago Jack Whitman had legally adopted Paul, and my son had forfeited a beautiful Italian monicker for an Anglo-Saxon whicker-and-gulp.

"He's one of my closest friends in Barclay." The way Halterman said this put me off. "Paul's not under suspicion for something, is he?"

"Should he be?"

"Of course not. Considering his background, he's about as up-and-up a soul as you're going to find in his generation. What we used to call a straight arrow. Doesn't smoke or drink. Wears his hair just the way Dwight D. Eisenhower would've liked it."

"I'm told you spend a lot of time together."

"By whom?"

"Why did you deny knowing something about the kids in this community?"

"I didn't deny knowing Paul. I just don't lump him with your faceless herd of 'kids in this community,' that's all."

"Why not?" My anger was getting up like a midnight wind, and I was pressing too hard. Another foursome had come down from the clubhouse, and they were taking in our talk from the edge of the waterlogged putting green.

Suddenly Halterman's eyebrows went up. When they came down again, he was chuckling like a munitions manufacturer after a declaration of war. "Oh, my goodness," he said. "If you look hard enough, there's a real family resemblance. It's the mouth, I think."

I looked at the people waiting on the putting green. No help from that quarter. No help from anywhere.

"You've got no legitimate business with me, and I don't think Paul would want me talking to you without his consent."

"I'm looking out for Paul's best interests."

"Better late than never."

"You're a grown man. Why do you need a boy's consent to talk to me?"

Halterman said, "You'd better go before I call the clubhouse manager down here." He made this sound like a suggestion rather than a threat. "Goodbye, Mr. Bevilacqua. I've got another group to start."

Brassiness opens doors that timidity stubs its toes against. In the clubhouse I wangled Halterman's address from the burly manager he had just threatened to have bounce me off the links. I told this gorilla I was the son of one of Halterman's old cronies in the architectural business. Said I wanted to surprise him when he got home that evening. Said I had a case of his favorite wine in the trunk of my car and an orchid corsage for his wife. It was dot-to-dot easy, this impromptu scam.

Two minutes later I was cruising out the Alabama Road to the Greenbriar Vacation Chalets, a pseudo-Swiss village in a thirty-acre glade of loblollies. Getting out of my car, I felt I should be wearing Tyrolean shorts, brocaded suspenders, and a pointed cap with a feather in its band. The chalets were A-frames with lots of curlicue cutouts in the gingerbread trim, and they all had dappled sundecks overlooking a weedy black tarn that didn't much resemble Lake Geneva.

I climbed to the boxy front porch of Chalet No. 73 and introduced myself to Mrs. Halterman's daytime nurse as an insurance investigator checking out the credentials of a policy applicant by the name of Paul Whitman. The nurse, a middle-aged black woman in rubber-soled shoes, led me through the house to the sundeck, where Neva Halterman was sitting in a wheelchair knitting or crocheting or whatever elderly crippled ladies do with brightly colored balls of yarn on afternoons that stretch out before them like the arid wastes of the Mojave.

"Sammy could tell you more about Paul than I can, Mr.—"

"Waters. Well, I came straight out from town. Didn't realize your husband wouldn't be home. Maybe you could answer a couple of questions just to keep me from wasting the trip."

Through this opening Mrs. Halterman juked like a tailback cutting for daylight. She said Sammy—Mr. Halterman, she meant—had met Paul at the Ocmulgee Pulpwood Company when her husband had driven a neighbor's pickup truck out there to fetch home a load of chips as mulch for her flower beds. Then, it having been quite near quitting time, Paul had ridden back with Sammy to help him shovel out the load—an offer the boy had made unbidden, apparently because he doubted Sammy's ability to accomplish this task alone. As a paltry sort of reward for the young man's help, Mrs. Halterman had slipped another frozen dinner into the oven, and over this meal the three of them had discussed history, politics, architecture, literature, music, and religion.

"Heavy," I said. "Did the kid bring along his note cards?"

"He's a very bright young man, but we talked about practical matters, too, Mr. Waters. He told us about his job at the pulpwood company and the difficult circumstances under which he grew up. He has a great deal of residual hostility toward his parents, I'm afraid, but as he matures he'll probably come to terms with it. 'A good man,' said John Dewey, 'is someone trying to be better.' That's what impressed Sammy and me about Paul, even more than his courtesy or his intellect—this quiet struggle to release the butterfly in the chrysalis of his youth."

Mrs. Halterman stared off over Little Lake Geneva, almost mistily, and I thought about Paulie trying to plant me up to my neck in pine chips. Some butterfly. Some chrysalis.

"So you and Mr. Halterman have become stand-in parents? Substitutes for the ones he doesn't get along with?"

"Oh, no. He's too independent for that. We treat him as an equal.

In fact, we finally told him to stop calling us Mr. and Mrs. Halterman and use our first names."

"He must spend a lot of time out here."

"Well, no, he really doesn't. He's probably been out here only four or five times. Sammy sees a great deal of him downtown, but I go to bed early and they're able to talk more comfortably at the place Paul's renting in Barclay. Paul's been very good for Sammy."

"Good for him?"

Neva Halterman fixed me with a frank and trusting stare. "I was paralyzed in an accident two years ago, Mr. Waters. I fell from a small bluff on a backpacking expedition through the North Georgia mountains. Sammy had to abandon me for three hours to summon help. I survived, as you see, but for several months my husband was a changed man, listless and very negative in his feelings about himself. He became a kind of zombie, a completely different person."

"He's all right now?"

"Oh, yes. Paul revitalized him. It was all I could do to get Sammy to drive out to the pulpwood company for those wood chips, but that little trip turned his life around again. Soon after meeting Paul he took his job as a starter at the golf course. It was a miracle, really. I'm extremely grateful to Paul for performing it."

I asked some more questions. In responding to one of these Mrs. Halterman said that after learning that Sammy had grown up in The Bronx and served in World War II, Paul had researched the histories of all the New York boroughs and both of the military units to which her husband had belonged. He had also done some genealogical work on her and Sammy's family names. In her opinion, Paul had undertaken these researches in order to supply himself a fund of "artificial memories" to coincide with the Haltermans' real ones.

"What was the point?" I asked.

Mrs. Halterman put a dunce cap on me with her eyes. "Why, to get closer to us. To earn—in his *own* mind, that is—the status of equal we'd bestowed upon him by insisting he call us Neva and Sam. An elderly person can seldom be a really good friend with a younger person—a postadolescent, I mean—because of the overwhelming disparity in their funds of experience. The amazing thing about Paul is that he worked to close this gap."

It was getting late. All I needed was for "Sammy" to come home while my buttocks were dimpling the canvas of one of his *recherché* deck chairs. When he did come home, his wife would tell him about

her visitor, and he would quickly deduce my identity—but by that time I hoped to be staking out Paulie's house in a last-ditch effort to figure out Halterman's disturbing interest in him. His wife being a cripple—a point that Sheila hadn't mentioned—had begun to worry me. And I was tired of listening to Neva Halterman's patter.

I stood up. "So you think the kid's a good insurance risk?"

"I know absolutely nothing about his driving record, but he's not your stereotypical teenager. —Don't you want to wait for Sammy? He should be home in fifteen or twenty minutes."

"No, no, you've been very helpful, Mrs. Halterman."

She propelled her chair toward the patio doors, which were surmounted by a scalloped stained-glass window that glowed indigo, amber, and lemon in the afternoon sunlight. Coming into the house, I had given all my attention to the woman on the sundeck so that this was my first good look at the window. Now I was gaping at it raptly, like a kid watching a Roadrunner cartoon.

"Paul made that," Mrs. Halterman said. "He's exhibited and sold some of his work at craft fairs. Within a year or two he hopes to quit his job at the pulpwood company and do stained-glass fulltime. He's remarkably talented, don't you think?"

"Very classy." I liked it—but it made me shiver.

"He's teaching Sammy how to do it, too."

She crossed the threshold into the chalet without my assistance or the nurse's, then wheeled about in front of a cabinet lined with stand-up photos of Halterman children and grandchildren. In a couple of them her husband was wearing a soldier suit and balancing curly-haired tykes on both knees. Thirty years ago, the photographs told me, Neva Halterman had been a looker. Even in her wheelchair, she was still a handsome woman.

"Must be hard for you," I said, "not being able to be a proper wife."

Her eyes caught fire. "Sammy was never one to want a *proper* wife, Mr. Waters."

I stood there trying to get a handle on this remark. It kept sliding in and out of my understanding.

"Sophistication can be a bigger trap than innocence, Mr. Waters. Worldly people outsmart themselves with cynicism almost as often as bumpkins do themselves in with ignorance."

"Thanks for your help, Mrs. Halterman." I got out of the Greenbriar Vacation Chalets pronto. On the drive back into town I passed Halterman's red Datsun going the other way.

Because I didn't know what to tell her, I didn't report back to La. Her suspicions about Paulie spiraling down into some sort of weird dependency on Halterman had really begun to nibble at me. Neva Halterman had described Paul as a self-sufficient, supermature eighteen-year-old, but as far as I was concerned her testimony on this point was worthless. She had talked with him only four or five times, and she hadn't seen him in action that morning at the Ocmulgee Pulpwood Company. Most of what she knew about him she got from her husband.

I got to thinking about the stained glass over the sliding doors to the Haltermans' sundeck. The irony of the whole screwed-up situation, I began to realize, was that Neva Halterman probably had just as much cause to be suspicious of Paul as Sheila had to be suspicious of the architect. Our kid might be playing the affection-starved old man along for a nest egg to finance his handicraft ambitions, while Halterman might well be making his payments contingent upon Paul's coming across physically. Being country-shrewd and church-mouse poor, Paul would probably tiptoe out of this imbroglia unscathed, but Halterman had placed himself in a hair-trigger blackmail trap. Whoever jostled the spring, or threatened to, would be in a position to bleed him dry.

This last thought was worth a private smile. I kept it between the rearview mirror and myself.

After two pork sandwiches, a side order of Brunswick stew, and a cup of gritty black coffee at Foster's Barbecue Hut, I asked for a cup of coffee to go and went out on my stakeout. Paul lived alone in a one-story frame house on a narrow street angling off the Atlanta highway. I took up position in the rear lot of Cooksie's Texaco station, which overlooked an unmowed meadow comprising Paul's corner of the neighborhood.

The shell of an ancient school bus and a mound of discarded tires pretty well concealed my Trans Am from the house. Although I made my coffee last until sunset, the last few drops went down like chilled linseed oil.

Forty minutes later Halterman drove up and parked parallel to the house under the cork elms drooping over the front porch. The porch light was on, and he paused before knocking to peer up and down the street. He looked directly up at Cooksie's for a second, but his gaze didn't tarry and I let my breath out in a nervous burst. Neither Paul nor the old man knew what kind of car I was driving

(unless Prescott Seeley or Mrs. Halterman's nurse had passed the information on), but it was pretty clear that Halterman had been looking for someone. Namely, Jimmy Bevilacqua.

Semis and pickups rumbled by on the highway, and a gaggle of pubescent black kids made their way up Paulie's street from the shantytown everyone called Pearl Harbor to the convenience store across from Cooksie's. Otherwise it was quiet.

I got out of my car and scampered down the incline behind the service station into the meadow beside the house. I had a small recording unit on my hip and a camera that would operate in the dark without a flash. After creeping around to the back, I climbed to a rickety screened porch, eased my way through the unlatched door, and stepped up onto an old railway bench to see what I could through the squares of the casement window. Pink Floyd's album *The Wall* was vibrating the floorboards, muffling the telltale bumps and creakings of my maneuvering on the bench.

Inside, Paul and Halterman were bent over a worktable on which glazing tools, lead came, and pieces of carefully cut stained glass were laid out atop a complicated paper pattern. The pattern seemed to be for a gothic window big enough to turn a K-Mart's into a cathedral.

My timing was bad, it looked like. Paul had his shirt off, but his eyes were all business. He was pointing at various parts of the design, explaining what had to be done yet. Halterman was really into this instruction. He put his hand on Paul's shoulder and laughed about the shape of a piece of glass that hadn't come out right. They were very cozy, studying the layout.

Because of the music, my recording unit was useless. I took a couple of photographs and stepped down from the bench. And just as Pink Floyd was taking a between-cuts breather, a slat fell out of the back of the bench and clattered into an empty metal basin underneath it.

I hopped through the door and down the dilapidated rear steps. The moon rolled out from behind a cloud to spotlight my getaway, and to avoid revealing the location of my car I had to head for a drainage ditch instead of Cooksie's. Crouched low in the grass, I saw Paul and Halterman come out onto the porch, down the exterior steps, and into the dewy September meadow.

"Leave us alone!" Paul shouted. "Leave us *alone!*"

Halterman touched Paul's elbow, talked to him softly, and inveigled him back to the porch. I stayed where I was for a long time.

Eventually the old man's Datsun pulled away from the house and accelerated through Barclay toward the turn-off to the retirement village. My watch put the time at 11:42. I had probably sent him packing early.

A couple of the lights in Paulie's house went off; tomorrow was a work day.

Relieved, I crept out of the drainage ditch and made a wide circuit through the meadow to Cooksie's. Then I climbed into my car, leaned my head back, and promptly fell asleep.

A crash awakened me. There in my windshield, fissures in an expanding network. My car began going up and down, and through the cracks I saw Paulie, dressed for work, looming up into the dawn like a gigantic hood ornament. He had just bounced a small cinder block off the windshield and now he was throwing his weight from side to side to set up a rocking motion in the body of my Trans Am. I kicked the door open and jumped outside, right into a hill of threadbare tires. Somehow I managed to get my balance.

"I'll whip your butt, boy!"

He stared down at me out of a face as bright and hard as a hubcap. "God, I hate you."

"Any idea why?"

The question made him blink. "Because you're the only living soul I know who can make me carry on like this."

"I'm your friend, Paulie. I'm trying to look out for you."

"So you told Sam. But you lied through your teeth to Neva. You've got no business putting her through that kind of Mickey Mouse."

"She's got a stake in this, too."

"In *what*, Daddy? In *what*?"

First time he'd called me Daddy in eight years. A slip-up or deliberate mockery? "In this fishy do-si-do between Halterman and you," I said.

Paulie just stared.

"I'm here to get to the bottom of it."

"You're at the bottom. You're always at the bottom. Stop worrying your evil mind and you might be able to figure everything out."

"I already have."

"I'll bet you have," Paul said. "I'll just bet you have." He jumped down from the hood and paced along the slope dropping away behind the filling station.

"What about my windshield?"

"It's cracked, Daddy, just like your opinion of my life." Paul trotted down the slope, then sauntered off through the bejeweled morning meadow toward his own automobile, a beat-up VW bug with over-sized tires and a custom-made grill.

"I'm going to have your wages garnisheed!" I called after him.

He whirled about and pointed a finger at me. "Stay away from my friends and stay away from the pulpwood company! You're in real danger if you keep this up—I swear to God, Daddy, you're in real danger!"

"His life's ruined."

"That's the smalltown view, La. How many kids Paulie's age've got a steady job, their own car, and a house to rent?"

"Haltermann's ruined him."

"Circumstantial stuff, Sheila-love. Nothing hard. Besides, there are thousands of well adjusted people in Atlanta like Paul."

"Barclay ain't Atlanta, and those other people ain't Paulie."

"What do you want me to do? I've got about as much influence with the kid as the Man in the Moon."

"Stop Haltermann, Jimmy. Get him out of Paul's life."

"You putting out a contract, La?"

"I don't mean knock him off. I just mean scare him off. You can do that."

"But why the hell *should* I?"

"Mama!" a child's voice cried. "Mama!"

That was Kimberly, Sheila's two-year-old daughter. Right at the beginning of *Captain Kangaroo* Sheila had put her in a high chair in the living room with a couple of squeeze toys and a big box of Honey Bran cereal.

"I mean, I'm not making any money here. Nothing I do is really going to change anything."

"Paul's your son, Jimmy, and I'm his mother, and you owe us."

"It won't make any difference, though."

"It will to me. It's the least you can do."

"Mama!"

"Coming, darlin'!"

An hour later I stumbled out of Sheila's trailer into the sunlight and found myself smack up against the flank of a red Datsun. The passenger door swung open, and the driver asked me to get in.

"What're you doing here?"

"I've decided to talk to you, Mr. Bevilacqua. Yesterday you *wanted* me to talk to you."

Wearily, I climbed inside. The automobile accelerated, nearly struck a stand of mailboxes at the end of the trailer court, and careered off down Fries' Mill Road at a furious clip. Halterman, as if I were an outerspace creature doing a shabby impersonation of a human being, kept glancing at me sidelong. I returned the favor, staring hard, and he started paying more attention to the shanty-lined road.

"Paul telephoned me from work this morning. He told me what he'd done to your car."

"That's all right. I intend to make him pay for it."

Halterman turned on an access road leading up into the state park, tourist territory. Autumn haze threaded the meadows and pine copses like cannon smoke, the aftermath of a ghostly Civil War engagement. I liked this country much better than I liked Atlanta, but unless you were a mill hand, a farmer, a pulpwooder, or a mewling merchant, you couldn't make a living here. Only chumps and retirees really enjoyed the place.

"Listen, Mr. Bevilacqua, I'm an architect. I know a little something about building complicated structures from the ground up. If you lay your foundation on quicksand, you can't even begin to build. Do you have any idea what I'm trying to tell you?"

"I learned about metaphors in high school. Catching onto when folks were talking down to me I picked up a lot earlier."

"Touché." With rigid hands and a cowcatcher chin Halterman negotiated the curvy, steepening road. "What I'm trying to say is that you've misjudged the relationship between your son and me."

"Is that right?"

"Paul and I are friends. Very good friends. That's the extent of it, the whole truth and nothing but."

"Seventy-year-old men and eighteen-year-old boys aren't 'friends,' Mr. Halterman. The world doesn't work that way."

"The world doesn't, but people sometimes do." He yanked the Datsun into a semicircle of gravel overlooking the matchbox landscape of pastures and churches in the valley and got out of the automobile, leaving the door open, and walked to the edge of the overlook with his hands in his pockets. A minute or two later I followed him, watching the smoke from my cigarette evaporate in the lazy September air.

"Mr. Bevilacqua, I want you to get out of Barclay and stay out. There's absolutely nothing to keep you here."

"I was raised here."

The architect approached me as if he was going to grab my lapels and try to fling me over the guard rail into the valley. Instead he took a check from his shirt pocket, and thrust it under my nose. By tilting my head I could see he had made it out to me for seven hundred and fifty dollars. "My, my, what could this be for?"

"Don't assume it's hush money. Part of it's to repair your broken windshield. The remainder's an inducement for you to save at least two lives, possibly more, by returning to Atlanta."

He pushed the check against my belt, but I refused to touch it.

"The lives are yours and Paul's," he went on. "I'm afraid of what he'll do if you stay around very much longer. So is he. He'll make a fine man—a man of talent and accomplishment—if he can outlast this urge to prove himself by doing you some terrible bodily harm."

"I came down here to help him."

"You can do that—and you can help yourself, too—by accepting this check and going on back to Atlanta."

I told Halterman that his motives were transparent. He feared the impact of exposure on his frail and trusting wife. Besides, three quarters of a grand was a mere drop of chlorophyll in the immense evergreen forest of his bank account.

Whereupon he got angry, heart-attack angry, and threatened to report me to the GBI for impersonating first one of its own agents and then an insurance-company detective. For an old guy he put on a rousingly convincing show, pacing the edge of the overlook in exactly the way Paulie had paced the slope behind Cooksie's after fracturing my windshield. Finally, though, he remembered his Up East manners and simmered down enough to paint me a picture of the consequences of "provoking Paul any further." An appeal to my better nature and an empty threat, nice and fatherly.

"Come on, Jimmy. Take the check."

Not a bad two days' work for a budget detective on a pleasure jaunt into the sticks. After all, how often does a man get paid for preventing his own murder?

I watched the faceted countryside give way to shards of skyscraper and splinters of concrete overpass. It was good to be shut of Sheila and the shackles of small-town domesticity.

A man's "friends," I decided, are nobody's business but his own.

You are about to read of the much-attempted murder by committee of Bulldog Dowd, a brawling, drink-crazed prospector turned outlaw. A tale taller than the gargantuan Paul Bunyan, a tale taller even than some of those penned by the Major Talent so deftly and delightfully admired here . . .

THE ASSASSINATION OF BULLDOG DOWD

by **JOHN H. DIRCKX**

There is an impression abroad that some narratives lately penned by the author of these lines are not all that might be desired in the article of veracity. Such rumors cannot fail to sting to the quick a man whose whole life has been offered up on the altar of Truth. A correspondent has even suggested that one of my reports contained what he was pleased to call "a gross overstatement of matters generally known to be false."

No such charge could possibly be brought against the following tale, whose complete and unmitigated veracity can be sworn to by every man, woman, and pack-mule in the town of Sangamo in Nevada Territory. I say, it can be. Whether it *will* be is another question entirely, for the men, women, and pack-mules of Sangamo have their own reasons for keeping silent on the matter. But having myself witnessed and participated in the events I am about to report, I believe it is my duty to put on record a case of frontier justice which is as full of moral lessons as a coyote is of guile.

It happened in this wise, as they say in better-conducted publications than this one.

Sangamo was a community of about seven hundred, situated on the edge of a broad and boulder-infested plain across which the snow-fed Calepin River dashed in reckless haste. Sangamo had no particular history to speak of; it was just a silver-mining camp that had experienced a sudden flourish of prosperity, overflowed its bounds, got uppity, and started calling itself a town. But when I arrived

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there in the winter of '63 to take up the duties of telegraph operator, I found a thriving municipality with a post-office, a grocery store, a barber shop, an assay office, two Chinese laundries, a weekly newspaper, and four saloons for every man in the town above the age of reason.

In those days there was not a self-respecting town in the Territory that did not harbor some depraved and murderous desperado in its bosom. The scourge of Sangamo was Bulldog Dowd, a brawling, drink-crazed prospector turned outlaw. Dowd had been christened Eustace by doting and irresponsible parents, but the only man who had ever been heard to call him that to his face was buried the same day, shot dead or near enough to it to make no difference.

Dowd's face was the color of a Mexican saddle that had been left out in the rain for a year or two, and the bones stuck halfway through his skin like a lot of picks and shovels rolled up in a piece of canvas. He lived in a half ruined shack on the edge of town and rode a sorry brute of a horse whose hide looked like a second-hand government blanket that had got too near the campfire.

He was the hardest man in a town of hard men, a paragon of unprincipled rascality in a land where unprincipled rascality was a condition of survival. When Dowd put in an appearance in the principal street of Sangamo, the men went the other way, the women barred their shutters, the dogs scuttled into the alleys with their tails tucked out of sight, and the cast-iron lion in front of the Columbia Emporium slunk behind a bush. Dowd would drink his fill two or three times a night in various barrooms about the town and never think of paying, nor the landlords of asking. He would pick a quarrel with a man for so slight a thing as an ill-chosen word or an unfriendly look, and if the event passed without bloodshed the man would pack up his belongings and leave town on the next stage and count himself lucky to get away with his life.

Anybody who ventured within half a mile of Dowd's claim was well advised to make arrangements with the undertaker beforehand, and only a born fool would dispute the right of way with him at a crossroads. It was actually whispered that Dowd had once kicked a cow. Even supposing that to be mere idle gossip, Bulldog Dowd was a kind of one-man invasion of the Goths and Vandals, a graver menace to public safety than typhoid fever, the plague, and membranous croup all rolled into one.

The reader must not suppose that the town of Sangamo lacked the most rudimentary elements of justice. It boasted a sheriff and a

judge, both of them as stalwart and honest as the eternal hills. But as they had an unconquerable fondness for seeing the sun come up every morning, they concerned themselves with jumped claims and broken houses and runaway cats, and left Dowd to his own devices.

Matters had gone on in this way for many months when a memorable event took place one night in the back parlor of Baldrick's Saloon. Near the conclusion of a lengthy game of pocket billiards, at which I happened to be present, the talk turned to Bulldog Dowd, who happened not to be present. Frank Westfall, the newspaper editor, emboldened by the congenial company and several glasses of rye whiskey, expressed a wish to attend Dowd's funeral. Owing to the uncertainty of his own affairs, he thought it best to do it as soon as possible. Two or three of the others present seconded Westfall's sentiments. This set the entire assembly to talking, and saying nothing to Dowd's advantage, and lamenting the sad inadequacies of the town's arrangements for dealing with desperadoes, and opining that when matters came to such a pass it was the duty of brave, free, and honest men to make their own law. (The sheriff and the judge happened not to be present, either.)

At this juncture a young mining speculator named Hank Shipley, known for the accuracy and frequency of his shooting, offered to lie in wait outside Dowd's shack that very night and, for the improvement of society, "let the moonlight through him." His valor was applauded, but several of the company jibbed at the use of firearms because the noise might attract unwelcome attention from the duly appointed guardians of the law.

"A knife is quicker and surer in the dark, anyway," said Westfall, the editor, "and two knives is surer than one." (Westfall was no snob. When he entered a saloon he left his grammar at the door.) In no time at all the crowd had formed a committee of the whole and elected Westfall and Shipley to ambush Dowd. Each man was to be equipped with the cutlery of his choice.

At the stroke of midnight the champions of justice set forth, full of determination and civic pride. Landlord Baldrick trimmed his lamps and served up fresh rations of determination and civic pride to the rest of us, and we settled in to wait with hushed voices and restless hearts for the outcome of our noble plan.

Between two and three o'clock in the morning, Westfall and Shipley returned, cursing themselves and each other and the whole boiling of us at Baldrick's. They said they had gone straight to Dowd's place in the hills and waited, shivering in the cold wind, for more

than an hour before the desperado came riding up. No sooner had he dismounted than they pounced on him, one from each side, and drove their steel into him up to the hilt—they thought.

"Either that devil incarnate had got himself up in an iron shirt," said Westfall, "or his skin is as hard as flint." Here the champions of justice produced their weapons, a couple of stout steel clasp-knives, for inspection. One of them was bent around like a crowbar and the other was broken off clean at the joint. Neither one had drawn blood. The committee adjourned for the night.

Next day around sundown, Bulldog Dowd turned up in town none the worse for wear. After wrecking a saloon or two, he pitched the blacksmith down a mine shaft and hung his anvil in a tree. Tom Boggs, the farrier, came around to Baldrick's to report these events to the committee and suggest a better way of dealing with Dowd. Tom said he was personally acquainted with every rattlesnake west of the Mississippi, and reckoned he knew one that would just relish paying a professional call on Dowd at his place that night. It took about ten seconds to get up a vote on the motion, and in ten more Tom was on his way into the hills with a lantern and a flour sack.

There were a few members of the committee who doubted that Westfall and Shipley had gone within shotgun range of Dowd's place the night before. At the insistence of these hard-headed doubters, the whole committee agreed to follow Tom and his friend at a respectful distance and witness the proceedings. In about an hour, half the population of Sangamo was huddled around Dowd's shack. The principal members of the committee crouched behind boulders and pines up close, and the rest were tucked away in the hollows half a mile away. Tom was hiding behind the shack with his snake, an eight-foot, forty-pound diamond-back with a murderous glint in its eye and a rattle loud enough to jar a locomotive engine off its rails.

It was a bright moonlit night, with a bitterly cold wind scouring across the plain and fastening its greedy claws on any human flesh it could find. We had to wait until Dowd made an appearance, so as to be sure he and the snake got properly acquainted, and in the circumstances the wait was mortally long. At last Dowd rode in from town, turned his old plug loose to graze among the stumps and rocks, and staggered across his doorstep. Tom shook the snake out of the sack through Dowd's bedroom window at the very instant that the desperado set foot in his front parlor, which was pretty precise timing since bedroom and parlor were one and the same room.

As to what happened next in that room, history remains mute.

But about a quarter of an hour after the rattlesnake went in, it came out again, moving fast. When it had got clear away from the shack it stopped and looked up shamefacedly at the men standing around, as much as to say, "I'll have to get you to excuse *me*, but this is no job for a self-respecting rattlesnake. If you're bent on exterminating a charging bull or a stampeding buffalo or maybe a federal tax assessor, I'm your snake, but this Dowd has a hide tougher than a steam boiler, and he's more than half rattlesnake himself." And then that serpent coiled away in the dark and pined itself to death.

There were those among us who wanted to put off further measures until they'd chased the chill out of their marrow with the medicaments they thought best suited for that purpose. Some others had had their fill of public service and were ready to dissolve the committee permanently. But Frank Westfall refused to acknowledge himself beaten by a low dog of a desperado who couldn't spell "perseverance."

Dowd's shack stood, or rather slouched infirmly, in the lee of a vast overhanging bluff. Westfall and Shipley and two or three others procured some picks and fuse and a couple of kegs of blasting powder, and set off along the path that wound up to the top of the bluff. After a while we heard them cutting holes in the rock to place their charges, and a while after that a match flared away at the top of the bluff and flickered for an instant in the wind. Then all was dark and quiet until the demolition party rejoined the waiting committee, panting and sweating in spite of the deathly chill in the air. "Five minutes," said Westfall, pulling out his watch.

At the appointed time, an explosion like the creation of Hell rent the stillness of the night and sent its echoes booming and screaming away through the hills. A mass of rock about the size of Germany separated itself from the top of the bluff with grandiose urgency and flew into a million shivers, each one of them as big as a banker's carriage, which unanimously descended in an avalanche of granite calculated to pound out the Great Pyramid as flat as a barn floor. While the onlookers scurried for cover, the boulders came crashing down and went bounding up again out of sight, only to come down again somewhere else without a trace of remorse. They piled up in heaps and drifts to right and left of Dowd's shack, but nothing bigger than a cherrystone seemed able to make up its mind to hit that shack square and honest.

In the midst of all this pandemonium, Dowd appeared in his doorway in his nightshirt, looking as calm as a fieldmouse in a haystack.

He yawned and put out his hand and felt around in the air for a bit, and then, evidently deciding that the sky meant business, he stepped back inside *and erected a little canvas awning above his bedroom window.*

When the last rock had fallen and the last echo died away, that shack slouched on exactly as before, unscathed and unintimidated. Dowd and his tumble-down fortress seemed to be proof against the most potent and elemental forces of nature. But instead of giving up the game, Frank Westfall swore he'd finish Bulldog Dowd that night or perish himself in the attempt. "There's half a peck of powder left in this keg," he said. "That shack is mostly timber, except for the chimney wall. I propose to lay a train of powder up to the door and burn the place down around him. He won't stand *that*."

By this time the committee were so stiff and numb with cold, and the prospect of a nice, cheering fire so welcome, that no one thought of demurring. Westfall laid the train himself and set a match to it with his own hand. A hundred pairs of eyes watched that faltering flame pick its way across the rock-strewn ground, and a hundred hearts skipped a beat whenever it threatened to go out in the wind. But it reached its destination at last, and after a bit of shyness and hand-wringing on the threshold, it laid hold of the doorposts. Presently we were the spectators of a fine, crackling conflagration. The flames devoured those dry timbers like a team of choirboys going through a tray of honey cakes.

The fire went on burning a great while, shooting up red sparks, and lighting up the faces of the crowd with a ruddy gleam, and blotting out the face of the setting moon with coils and billows of black smoke. The committee pressed forward to make sure that Dowd didn't escape with his life from that raging furnace, and then, repelled by the intense heat, they fell back again. The roof of the shack, being composed mainly of empty beef tins and sod, and supported by a couple of stone posts, held like a miracle. But while we watched, one wall crumbled away to reveal Bulldog Dowd asleep on an old iron bedstead next to the chimney.

Presently he stirred and stretched and sat up and shivered a bit, and poked around in the hearth with a pick handle. Then he shook his head with grim resolve and slipped out the back door to the woodpile. Almost at once he reappeared with an armload of greasewood logs, and when he'd got them heaped on the hearth to his satisfaction, he settled down on his rude bunk again and composed himself to rest.

Never in all the world, perhaps, were a crowd of well-intentioned citizens so cruelly balked in their humanitarian strivings. The committee tramped home cold, tired, and evil-tempered. It was plain that Bulldog Dowd was either made of more than mortal stuff, or enjoyed the special protection of a misguided providence. Either way, nobody cared to meddle with him any further that night.

Frank Westfall was hit hardest by this last disappointment. He had set his heart so intently on writing Dowd's obituary that he was positively beyond consolation. He sat all next day in his usual seat at Baldrick's, trying to float away his misery on a sea of whiskey. To see that lively tongue stilled, that iron heart daunted, that fertile brain without resource was enough to plunge the airiest spirit into dark despair. By noon most of the committee had assembled around him to offer their consolations and sample his.

Suddenly Beechwood, the barber, one of the most active members of the committee, burst into the room. His features were alight with the fire of inspiration. He set a parcel on the table in front of Westfall. "All is not yet lost," he said. "Dowd's skin may be as thick as a railroad tie and as tough as harness leather. Maybe he can laugh at steel knives, and rattlesnakes, and falling boulders, and fire. But—is his insides as tough as his outsides?"

This cryptic remark unloosed a flood of questions from the committee and even drew a flicker of interest from Westfall. The barber spoke not a word, but unwrapped the parcel on the table to disclose a quart bottle of Baggett's Instant Rat and Mole Killer. There was not a man present who didn't recognize the gilt label of this remarkable product, which was reputed to contain the Deadliest Substance Known to Science. One pinch was guaranteed to destroy any creature smaller than a rhinoceros within a quarter of a minute. Next to Baggett's rat poison, the most unwholesome recipe ever boiled up by Lucrezia Borgia was pap for the nourishment of babes. Baggett's was so lethal that a bottle of it left open by mistake would fetch birds down stone-dead from the clouds and could lame an ox at thirty yards. Its powers were celebrated in every newspaper and magazine between Boston and the Sandwich Islands, proclaimed on signposts and billboards among all the haunts of men, and mentioned in passing in the book of Deuteronomy.

The committee voted that this redoubtable elixir of death should be put to the test without delay against Dowd's internal economy, mixed in equal parts with Baldrick's best Irish whiskey. But some of the warier members wanted to lengthen the odds against the

desperado by including a little hardware in the program, and hang the noise. Behind the post-office stood a rusty nine-inch cannon, abandoned because of a broken wheel by a company of troops from San Francisco bound for Utah at the time of the troubles there.

We hauled it around to the street in front of Baldrick's and filled it half full with powder and the rest of the way with cast-off razors, knives, scissors, hatchet blades, horseshoes, and sundry other products of native craftsmanship. For wadding we used an old boot whose sole had gone to perdition, and we rammed the charge down with the axle of a wrecked stagecoach.

It was arranged that Baldrick would first pump Bulldog Dowd full of Baggett's rat poison, and if the desperado walked out of the saloon alive the committee were to let loose at him with the cannon at point-blank range. A little after dark Dowd rode into town, and here fate took a hand (as they say in uninspired works of fiction), for he made straight for Baldrick's Saloon and demanded to be primed for the night's deviltries with a gallon or two of the best stuff in the house. He had downed the first glass of poisoned whiskey and poured out a second one before anybody dared to look at him, and when they did look they saw something verging on the miraculous. For the first time in the memory of man, Dowd was smiling. He loved the stuff—couldn't get enough of it. He swallowed the whole bottle in three and a half minutes and asked for more. When Baldrick hesitated, Dowd just dashed off a string of moderately offensive oaths in a sociable way and walked out.

The men in the street were ready and they did not faint in the hour of duty. They fired off the contents of that cannon at a range of seventeen inches from Dowd's top vest button. The blast carried away his left lung, pulverized his liver, and left behind no more of his heart than would suffice for a bill collector. Did he fall down dead, as any decent, God-fearing man would have done in his condition? He did not. He staggered a bit—I am bound to admit that, for it is true—and he came near to falling, but he didn't quite do it. Then he wandered, in a sort of daze, into the one place in all of Sangamo where he could claim sanctuary and expect to find hospitality—the front garden of Preacher Sutton's house next to the saloon.

Preacher Sutton had never seen the inside of a seminary, but he possessed, in fact if not in law, three or four books that had once belonged to a man who *had*. As he commanded a fine round baritone voice like a cattle auctioneer's, and was often sober on Sunday morn-

ings, he had drifted into the habit of conducting services for such of the citizens as were inclined that way. There was a rumor in the town that one of these services had been attended by no fewer than seven persons. Since I am on my honor to produce a narrative of unvarnished truth, I do not state this as a fact but only offer it as an example of the kind of idle fancies that the vulgar mob is apt to paint for itself.

The preacher was one of the few men in town who had declined to join the committee (besides the sheriff and the judge, who hadn't been invited). Nobody was surprised when he came out to lend succor to the wounded desperado. Dowd turned down the preacher's offer to attend to his wounds, but said he thought he might just sit down for a minute in Sutton's parlor. The two men had no sooner disappeared into the house than the whole committee went crowding into the garden and stepped up close to the windows.

We watched in awed silence while the preacher and his wife pulled off Dowd's boots and tried to make him comfortable on a sort of truckle bed near the fire. There was a look of pain and suffering on Dowd's face that seemed to grow deeper and more pitiful with each passing moment. At last the desperado reared up and threw off the blankets, the pillows, and the featherbed on the floor. Then he sank back on the bare wooden slats, the picture of comfort and serenity.

But by and by a new look of trouble came across his face and he made signs that he wanted something. The preacher's wife leaned close and heard him ask in a hoarse whisper for something to drink. She hastened to fetch a decanter containing a decoction of ripe fruit, honey, and rubbed sage, a temperance beverage with which her name is inextricably linked in the annals of Sangamo. She had poured several mouthfuls of it down Dowd's throat before the suffering man could summon the strength to resist. Then he gave her a look of injured innocence that would have withered the hanging gardens of Babylon, and turned up his eyes.

The preacher took this for a sign that his guest's last hour had come. Remembering his professional duties, he got out a gilt-edged black book and began to intone a lesson full of Christian consolation for the dying. Bulldog Dowd's brow darkened like a range of pine-covered hills when the setting sun sinks beyond it. Every pious sentiment seemed to send a shiver of agony through his perforated frame, and when the preacher spoke of charity, joy, peace, patience, and benignity all in one breath, it was just a fatal combination. Each one of those words hammered into the helpless man like a rifle

ball, and when the last one had been spoken Bulldog Dowd was a corpse.

The sheriff was summoned away from a game of backgammon to take charge of the remains. Some instinct made him doubt the preacher's account of Dowd's demise, and he ordered an inquest. The session began at once, with the judge presiding. There was not one man on the jury that had not also served on the committee and conspired to assassinate Dowd. Hank Shipley was on that jury, and Tom Boggs, and Beechwood the barber; and Frank Westfall was the foreman.

For a time the future looked dismal for the preacher and his wife. There was a general feeling that after every measure tried by the committee had failed, it was the Suttons' well meant ministrations that had killed Dowd. But out of a sense of gratitude for this public service, the jury took care to see them exonerated. One or two particulars finally came out about the cannon, but in so garbled a form that the judge would have needed the powers of Solomon to fix the blame on its rightful owners. His verdict was that Bulldog Dowd had committed suicide while the balance of his mind was disturbed, in that he did wilfully appear in a place where the tide of popular sentiment was against him.

There is probably no foundation to the rumor that it was three days before the undertaker could get Dowd to stay in his coffin long enough to be buried. But I can state it as matter of the most absolute and unimpeachable certainty—because I took down the message myself as it came over the wire—that a week after his death Bulldog Dowd telegraphed back from Hell for a dozen bottles of whiskey from the same lot he'd sampled just before the mosquito bit him.

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY NEWSLETTER

CRIME BEAT

by **R. E. PORTER**

GUN IN CHEEK: As Bill Pronzini points out in the Foreword to his *Gun in Cheek*, published this month by Coward, McCann & Geoghegan (\$14.95), critical studies of crime fiction generally feature the positive side. It's the best in the field that are examined, analyzed, and written about. Now, in his first non-fiction book, Pronzini has focused upon the worst—the bad mysteries, bad plots, and bad writers we've all encountered from time to time in our reading.

The result is a truly delightful book, examining such (justifiably) forgotten writers as Michael Morgan, Tom Roan, Milton M. Raison, and many others, along with a few who are still around. The highly knowledgeable commentary covers, among other topics, the hard-cover mysteries of Phoenix Press, the low points of the pre-war pulp magazines, and the worst of the post-war paperbacks. Pronzini sometimes finds it necessary to reveal solutions in the course of his plot summaries, but I can't imagine anyone objecting. He's saved us all—scholars and fans alike—from

endless hours of bad reading, and given us a good many chuckles along the way.

Gun in Cheek includes an Introduction by Ed McBain which cheerfully sets the proper tone for what is to follow. A bibliography lists nearly 150 bad mysteries, and an index locates references to them in the text. Much as I've admired Bill Pronzini's increasingly skillful novels and short stories, I'm tempted to call this his best book yet. It's one that deserves to be remembered at awards time.

POLICE PROCEDURALS: One form of detective story is only about thirty-five years old, and is encountered more often in novels than in short stories. It's the subject of a new critical study by George N. Dove titled *The Police Procedural* (Bowling Green University Popular Press, \$10.95 paper, \$20.95 cloth). The book covers women, black, Jewish, and Hispanic police detectives and devotes separate chapters to John Creasey, Hillary Waugh, Ed McBain, Nicolas Freeling, and other major procedural writers. One could fault

the book's proofreading in a couple of places, and the author tends to repeat himself, but on the whole it's a good, comprehensive look at an important new direction for mystery fiction.

THE CORRECTED NERO WOLFE: If, like me, you relished William S. Baring-Gould's *Nero Wolfe of West Thirty-Fifth Street* when it first appeared in 1969, perhaps you too were bothered by its errors and omissions, especially in the chronology at the back of the book. Baring-Gould died shortly before the book went to press, which no doubt explains the failure to correct these errors. Happily, a new paperback edition, recently published by Penguin Books, has been corrected by John McAleer, Rex Stout's biographer. It makes a perfect companion to the Wolfe novels.

AFRICAN MYSTERY WRITERS: The first organization of African mystery writers has been formed in Kenya under the direction of J. I. Mwagojo. The group, called Fiction Writers, plans to promote African mystery writing through prize contests and writers' conferences. Further details may be obtained from J. I. Mwagojo, Chairman, Fiction Writers, P.O. Box 84857, Mombasa, Kenya, Africa.

COMING ATTRACTIONS: Guy Townsend is editing an *Annotated*

Bibliography of Secondary Sources, listing books and essays about the mystery which have appeared throughout the world. The British section of the bibliography is being compiled by Robert Adey, and the Spanish and Latin American sections by Donald Yates. The Japanese section will be by Hirohisa Shinpo, translated by Jiro Kimura. Sections on France, Germany, Italy, America, and other countries will also be included. Brownstone Books will publish the mammoth undertaking in late 1983 or early 1984.

Winter's Crimes 14, latest volume in the dependable British series, features new stories by Simon Brett, Peter Lovesey, Julian Symons, and others.

The British edition will be published in November, with an American edition due from St. Martin's Press in January.

The first book to be edited by Joan Kahn for her new mystery list at Dutton will be published this month. It's *Goosefoot*, an Irish mystery by Patrick McGinley, author of last year's highly praised first novel, *Bogmail*.

Julian Symons, the most recent Grand Master honored by Mystery Writers of America, has moved to Viking Press, which will publish his new Victorian mystery, *The Detling Murders*, in January.

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"Q"

BLOODY VISIONS

by CHRIS STEINBRUNNER

With appropriate ceremony recently, the paper archives—scripts, contracts, legal and production correspondence—of the old RKO Radio Pictures studio, which flourished for thirty years until it ceased making films in 1960, were turned over to the Theater Arts and Film Library of the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), for preservation, to be made available for students and scholars of the motion picture. Unlike most other studios, which routinely destroyed its old records over the years, RKO General, the broadcasting group which had acquired the motion picture company, retained the rights to the film properties and carefully preserved and catalogued the files. Now it has turned over this priceless collection of documents to UCLA, saving a corner of Hollywood's past and reminding us that RKO Radio—once Hollywood's fifth largest studio, symbolized by a pulsating radio tower atop a turning globe—did not neglect the mystery genre.

From its first years, RKO included crime films in its lineup that still stir memories today. *The Phantom of Crestwood* (1932), in which Ricardo Cortez traps the killer of a blackmailer among weekend guests at a mansion atop a cliff—there is a secret tunnel leading to the beach below—is still a choice example of the old-dark-house puzzle. *Secrets of the French*

Police, also 1932, and supposedly based on factual *Hearst Magazine* reports, is pulp thriller beyond belief: a Fu Manchu-style villain hypnotizes a flower-seller into believing she is the royal heir to the Russian crown, while quite as a sideline he murders his enemies by encasing them inside statues; the hero is a Parisian pickpocket whose French honor demands he steal only from foreigners. *Muss 'em Up* (1936) is a gem of a Hammett-style private-eye film, with flip hard-boiled Preston Foster called in to find out who killed a millionaire's pet dog—with more serious deaths to follow. The title refers to a 1930's police directive on how to handle gangsters. William Powell, as smooth as his Nick Charles for another studio, took cases reminiscent of *The Thin Man* for RKO—recovering a vanished necklace with Ginger Rogers in *Star of Midnight* (1935), and playing a cheery divorced surgeon reluctantly helping ex-wife Jean Arthur clear up a racetrack killing in *The Ex-Mrs. Bradford* the following year. In *The Mad Miss Manton* (1938) Barbara Stanwyck is a madcap heiress whose social set is being trimmed by murder—she finally is forced into tracking the killer down into an abandoned subway. Rare is the revival house restoring these seldom-seen thrillers. They are surely worthy of a mystery retrospective.

Of course, RKO also gave the

world mystery films everyone remembers. *Murder, My Sweet* (1945) was a superb visualization of Raymond Chandler's *Farewell, My Lovely*—and remained the screen adaptation of his works which the author felt truest and best. Dick Powell, up until then a light-musical-comedy performer, did an abrupt reverse turn as rough, gritty Philip Marlowe, and played him skillfully and well. (Chandler thought Powell closest to his concept of the detective.) Actually, having acquired the rights to the novel some two years before, RKO had just changed the name of the detective and already used the plot line for *The Falcon Takes Over*, an entry in its mystery series. Curiously, then, George Sanders as the Falcon preceded Philip Marlowe down the dark streets of *Farewell, My Lovely*.

The studio spotlighted many mystery craftsmen. Orson Welles—already legendary for *Citizen Kane*, for which RKO had brought him to Hollywood—worked Eric Ambler's *Journey into Fear* (1943) into a doom-laden voyage to exotic night ports, giving himself the role of Colonel Haki of the Turkish Secret Police. John Garfield is the troubled Spanish Civil War veteran, released from a prison camp but stalked to New York, in Dorothy B. Hughes' *The Fallen Sparrow* (1943). Fritz Lang directed the powerful *Woman in the Window* (1944), in which Edward G. Robinson is a respected, ordinary family man whose infatuation for a woman he sees first in a portrait leads him

to murder. Joan Bennett is the mesmerizing *femme fatale* for whom he ruins his life. In *The Spiral Staircase* (1946)—based on the novel by Ethel Lina White—Dorothy McGuire plays a mute servant-companion to an elderly invalid in a gloomy, isolated house, and the target of a maniac determined to rid the world of the physically imperfect. The suspense from the very first moments of the film—in which director Robert Siodmak shows us a huge closeup of the killer's eye as he focuses on his first victim—is spellbinding. In *The Window* (1949) we are, along with young Bobby Driscoll, witness to a murder in a tenement flat. Unfortunately, the boy has spun wild tales before and neither his parents nor anyone else believe what he claims to have seen that hot night out on the fire-escape. No one, that is, except the pair he accuses, who are out to silence him. The story was by Cornell Woolrich, one of several given screen treatment by the studio.

RKO in its heyday churned out detective series ranging from spinster schoolteacher Hildegard Withers (created by Stuart Palmer) to Leslie Charteris' debonair Saint. It was the studio of Val Lewton's atmospheric terror films. Even more importantly, RKO in the post-war years—starting with *Murder, My Sweet*—pioneered the darkly realistic noir film, which moved the mystery motion picture into an important new direction. That brooding urban landscape we will explore in the next EQMN column.

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INTERVIEW: WILLIAM CAMPBELL GAULT

EQMN: After a fifteen-year absence from mystery writing, you recently published two new mystery novels featuring your hard-boiled detective, Brock "The Rock" Callahan—*The Bad Samaritan* and *The CANA Diversion* (Raven House, \$2.25 each). In those fifteen years you wrote steadily for the juvenile-fiction market. Did you miss writing mysteries?

GAULT: I missed writing them but wasn't sure I could sell them so easily. I had sold all I'd written up to the time I stopped, but the last one was rejected twice before it was finally bought. It was bought, I feared, because my juveniles written for that publisher were doing so well and they could afford to give me an advance and print the book without losing much money. So I decided to concentrate on the juveniles.

EQMN: *Don't Cry for Me*, your first novel about Brock Callahan, won the Edgar for best first novel of 1952. Does Brock, an ex-Rams football star, resemble you?

GAULT: Brock is probably what I'd like to be—tall, fairly handsome, and muscular. I'm none of these things, though muscular enough for a little guy—5'7", 160 pounds.

EQMN: Many of your fans were upset by his recent marriage.

GAULT: Art Scott, who wrote a piece on me for *Twentieth Century Crime and Mystery Writers* (St.

Martin's), said he was disappointed in Brock's marriage because he was afraid the series would turn into one of those idiocies where the wife helps solve his cases. Fortunately, I didn't do this. So help me, I'm not sure why he got married, except that I now live in Santa Barbara and I wanted to transplant him up here, and there would be no reason for him to live up here if he planned to stay in the private-eye racket in L.A.

EQMN: How do you spend your spare time?

GAULT: I play golf twice a week, bridge only when forced into it. I go to a writers' lunch every two weeks and work around the yard when I have to.

EQMN: Your neighbor Ross Macdonald dedicated *The Blue Hammer* to you. When you get together with fellow mystery writers, what do you talk about?

GAULT: When mystery writers, and I imagine all writers, get together they usually talk about the parsimony of publishers, the illiteracy of reviewers, the obstinacy of editors, and the undeserved luck of their obviously inferior peers who wind up with best sellers.

EQMN: For over ten years there has been an annual Bouchercon, a convention in memory of the late mystery writer and critic Anthony Boucher, who called your work "consistently rewarding and refreshing." You were given a shoe

sole as a special award at last year's Bouchercon in Milwaukee. Why was that?

GAULT: The centerfold in the Bouchercon program was a picture of me standing in front of my sole-cutting machine at the Weyenberg Shoe Factory in Milwaukee in 1936. I was a handsome youth of 26 and had just sold my first story. It was a story the McClure Newspaper Syndicate did not buy for the usual five dollars when it was sent directly to them but paid fifty dollars for when it was submitted in the *Milwaukee Journal* short-story contest. An editor from McClure thought it might be a plagiarism because he remembered a similar story. It wasn't similar—it was the same story.

EQMN: How did you come to start writing?

GAULT: It was the only thing I wanted to do, and the only way to find out if I was any good was to try it. After selling that first story in 1936 I turned to full-time fiction writing in 1941. I went into the Army then, but I've been at it ever since I came out of the Army in 1945.

EQMN: Do you have any tips for aspiring mystery writers?

GAULT: All I can tell any writer is to keep working. Though it's a precarious business. I read in *Forbes*—I think—that the freelance fiction writer averaged \$5,200 last year.

I can remind all young mystery writers of the obvious: murder needs motive, means, and opportunity. Shroud any one of the deadly triplicate in the story and you have a mystery.

THE JURY BOX

by **JON L. BREEN**

Aside from the fact that they both write about Southern California police, it is hard to imagine two writers more dissimilar than Joseph Wambaugh and Dell Shannon. But in the reviews of one of his recent novels, John Wainwright was likened to both. The Wambaugh comparison seems closer to the mark, but in truth the retired Yorkshire policeman is a distinctive, one-of-a-kind performer.

**** John Wainwright: *Blayde R.I.P.*, St. Martin's, \$10.95. The

best and most ambitious Wainwright novel I've read is this fictional biography of a policeman. An insider's knowledge of what police work is really like gives the tale an unmistakable flavor of realism, and Wainwright's prose is under better control than ever before. It is a tribute to his mastery that he can take one of the most hackneyed situations in crime fiction and film—two brothers, one a cop, one a crook—and create from it a crime novel of near classic proportions.

**** John D. MacDonald: *Cinnamon Skin*, Harper and Row, \$13.95. The twentieth Travis McGee novel recounts the rehabilitation of Meyer, whose yacht, the *John Maynard Keynes*, is blown up with his niece on board. The search for her killer has some of the step-by-step fascination of a Hillary Waugh procedural, and JDM's eye for social mores and ear for southern speech were never sharper. (Also, there is a great joke on page 159.)

*** Reginald Hill: *Who Guards the Prince?*, Pantheon, \$12.95. One of mystery fiction's most versatile writers this time cuts loose with a wild, all-stops-out thriller featuring a royal romance, a conspiracy of Freemasons, and other elements out of Edgar Wallace. The people are real and involving, but the enterprise is obviously at least partly tongue-in-cheek, as reflected in some of the character names.

*** Leonard Sanders: *Act of War*, Simon and Schuster, \$15.50. With the help of FBI documents procured under the Freedom of Information Act, Sanders offers a fascinating fictionalized speculation on a great historical whodunit: the 1942 sinking of the French liner *Normandie* in New York harbor. The author's massive research is effectively integrated into a well told thriller plot, but this is one of those fact-fiction concoctions where an accounting of exactly what and who are real would be most helpful.

*** William J. Coughlin: *No More Dreams*, A and W, \$13.95. Though it concerns political and judicial chicanery and provides ample suspense, Coughlin's latest is only

barely within the crime/mystery genre. The maneuvering to appoint a replacement for the Supreme Court's swing man makes for a solid popular novel, unimpeachably readable despite occasional clichés.

*** June Thomson: *Shadow of a Doubt*, Doubleday/Crime Club, \$10.95. Detective Chief Inspector Rudd, newly promoted, looks into the disappearance of the wife of the director of a psychiatric clinic. This is solid British detection with strong style, characterization, and narrative energy, combined with a wonderful elaborateness of plot that recalls the puzzle-spinners of the Twenties and Thirties.

*** Marcia Muller: *Ask the Cards a Question*, St. Martin's, \$10.95. The second book-length case for San Franciscan Sharon McCone, one of several good female private-eyes currently in action, is a competent standard whodunit, well cast and briskly told. But it perpetuates one of mystery fiction's most irritating conventions: the withholding of information from the police by characters who should know better.

*** S. F. X. Dean: *Such Pretty Toys*, Walker, \$11.95. The second adventure of English professor Neil Kelly is as good as his debut. This time the locale is Santa Fe, New Mexico, and Kelly (interrupted en route to his sabbatical in England) is involved with spies and computer crime. The dialogue sparkles, and the plot is complicated and surprising. This could be one of the best new series of recent years.

*** Hugh Pentecost: *With Intent*

To Kill, Dodd, Mead, \$9.95. Pentecost, who can always be relied on to reflect current events in his plots, includes a Jerry Falwell-type moral crusader in his latest Pierre Chambrun mystery. This is good medium-grade Pentecost, with ample twists and a nice suspenseful windup. Be warned, though, that the promised locked-room mystery fizzles out midway.

** Henry Denker: *Outrage, Morrow*, \$13.95. Denker's polemic against over-protection of the rights of the accused is undeniably readable and skillfully constructed, if a trifle manipulative and oversensitive to the breezes of public opinion. The well differentiated characters are medium-grade card-

board. The novel is of special interest to trial buffs: this is one of that minority of courtroom novels that includes the jury's deliberations.

** Robert J. Randisi: *Eye in the Ring*, Avon, \$2.75. There have been plenty of retired athletes in the ranks of fictional private-eyes, but Miles Jacoby in his first book-length case is both a newly licensed shamus and a practicing pro boxer. There are plenty of clichés and stylistic infelicities here, but Randisi's enthusiasm and story-telling knack keep the story chugging along. (I'm not sure, though, I'd want to trust a private-eye who ordered a double mashed potatoes with his Kentucky Fried Chicken.)

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"Q"

DETECTIVER SE

A LA CARTE

by E. C. SANBORN

A timid and meek Chinese bride
Added poison to meat, nicely fried.
Though the flavor was hellish
The groom ate with such relish
The verdict was chop suey-cide.

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The Saturday the new tenant moved into 11-H, a very warm June day, she had flung open her windows and then zeroed in on the piano. "Send In the Clowns," which a gifted musician could demolish in under four minutes, took her more than fifteen with no time off for good behavior.

Another sparkling, darkling tale of New York apartment-house living from the irrepressible George Baxt . . .

I WISH HE HADN'T SAID THAT

by **GEORGE BAXT**

66 **N**ow that I've rung in the new year, I'd like to wring my neighbor's neck." Malcolm Brodsky was seated at his desk, glaring at the blank sheet of paper in his typewriter and balancing the telephone receiver between his shoulder and his fleshy chin. The rest of the instrument was on the floor at his feet, anchor for twenty-five feet of telephone line which usually made it possible for Malcolm to pace the length and width of his attractive living room, with the occasional airy indulgence of a heavy-footed entrechat or timestep. Even seated, at least one foot was active. It was tapping angrily, causing Malcolm's new best friend, Andy Agouta, who was on the other end of the wire to inquire anxiously, "What's that banging on your end?"

"My foot," snapped Malcolm. "Now she's murdering 'Getting To Know You.'"

The "she" murdering "Getting To Know You" lived across the court, two stories up. She was learning how to play the piano. She

© 1982 by George Baxt.

practised from two to three hours every night when she got home from work, usually around five o'clock. Saturdays and Sundays was open season for her. There were no set hours for practising. On weekends she attacked the ivories when the spirit moved her, which was frequently. Obviously a beginner and working from sheet music, her repertoire was limited. The limitations were exclusively show tunes.

The Saturday she had moved into the apartment, 11-H, a very warm June day, she had flung open her windows and then zeroed in on the upright. "Send In the Clowns," which a gifted musician could demolish in under four minutes, took her more than fifteen with no time off for good behavior. Malcolm had been spared this tortuous initiation because he was away for the weekend visiting his sister out in Montauk on the tip of Long Island. Andy Agouta, an aspiring architect, had come to brunch on Sunday and, fascinated by Malcolm's outrageous wit and apparently cavalier attitude toward everything and everyone, himself included, promptly offered to drive Malcolm back to New York and Malcolm had accepted with alacrity. It saved on the train fare.

Halfway to New York, when he found a chance to speak (Malcolm was blowing his nose), Andy asked, "Why are you so mean to your nephew?"

"He's noisy."

"I didn't notice he was particularly noisy."

"I hate noise."

"If you hate noise you shouldn't be living in New York."

"I don't live in New York, I *survive* in New York." Andy, who was a very good driver and kept his hands on the wheel and his eyes on the road in front of him, nevertheless stole frequent looks at Malcolm's agitated face, because the steady succession of one-liners were funnier when you caught the accompanying expressions on Malcolm's face.

"Thank God I finally have a quiet apartment. I mean I've lived all over the city and been driven to near self-destruction by neighborly stereos, radios, hi-fi's, overhead heels clicking on uncarpeted floors. Across the courtyard from me, two floors up, there used to be a clarinetist—of all the ugly instruments. Complain? Did I complain? I almost got terminal from complaints. Fortunately, early Thanksgiving morning he jumped out of the window. Bless his heart, he took the clarinet with him. The apartment has been blissfully

empty ever since. The building is trying to go co-op, so they haven't been that anxious to rent it again. How about you, Andy? Is it quiet where you live?"

"I never notice."

Malcolm stared stonily at Andy's well made profile. "You never notice? What kind of a neurotic are you?"

The following day a little after five P.M. Malcolm's complacency was shattered. He was seated at the desk revising a chapter of his work in progress, an essay on the dangerous mental pollution being spread by television soap-operas for an obscure, esoteric magazine that published four times a year, when he heard the piano.

His right hand froze in midair. His left had gripped the edge of the desk until the knuckles turned white. His eyes narrowed, his nose twitched, and his inner radar, always in superb working condition, signaled in the direction of apartment 11-H. His eyes lifted slowly. The windows of 11-H were flung wide and he saw the back of an upright piano, placed smack against the windows. He couldn't see the villain at the keyboard.

He looked frantically at the windows of other apartments. There was no one in sight. Was no one else annoyed enough to look and try to detect the origins of this cacophonous obscenity? He hurried to the telephone table and snatched up his personal directory, searching for the building superintendent's phone number, when the telephone rang. "Hello!" he shrieked, grabbing the receiver.

"Dear heaven," shouted Andy at the other end, "don't destroy my eardrum! It's Andy!"

"It's hell! There's someone in eleven-H!"

Andy wondered if his new friend took drugs. "What's eleven-H?"

"What do you mean what's eleven-H! The suicidal clarinet player, remember? *Now* there's someone up there murdering 'Send In the Clowns' on the piano! The composer ought to thank his lucky stars he doesn't live in the neighborhood. Listen to it! Just listen!" He carried the phone across the room to his desk, then leaned across the desk and held the telephone out the window.

"Sure sounds awful," commiserated Andy.

"Awful? Are you always given to such understatement?"

"Are we on for dinner tonight?"

"I can't think about food while my stomach's turning. I'll call you back. Stay home and stay off the phone!" Malcolm slammed down the receiver, found the building superintendent's number, dialed it,

and waited. There was no reply. Slamming the phone down, he grabbed his keys from the table near the door and hurried down to the lobby. Hassim, the Iranian student who served as part-time doorman, told him the superintendent was in the laundry room. Malcolm hurried down to the basement. In the laundry room he found the superintendent working with a monkey wrench on a pipe above the sink.

"Walter!"

Walter Midzik froze on the stepladder. He recognized the hysteria. Nine-B. Brodsky comma Malcolm. Malcolm was tugging at one of Walter's pantlegs. Walter resented the familiarity and pulled his foot away, almost upsetting the ladder.

"Walter!" Malcolm's voice was up several octaves.

"Calm yourself, Mr. Brodsky, calm yourself. The exterminator comes on Friday."

"I don't need the exterminator." His hands were on his hips, which signaled he meant business. "What's that atrocity in eleven-H?"

Hell, thought Walter, here we go again. His mouth formed into one of its best building-superintendent smiles. "A very nice young lady moved in on Saturday."

"With a piano! That piano has got to stop!"

Walter remembered the piano all right. It didn't fit into the elevator and had to be hauled up eleven flights of stairs, with the young lady accompanying it every step of the way to make sure it wasn't bruised or damaged. Walter continued to dwell on thoughts of the young lady—her inviting lips, her boudoir eyes, those long exciting legs that seemed to begin at her waist, the way she looked at him when he arrived at the apartment to have a look at the air-conditioner she said wasn't working. Which it wasn't, thereby proving she was honorable.

"Why are you smirking at me?" Malcolm demanded.

Walter was aroused from his reverie. "Her air-conditioner is on the blink. The engineers can't get here until sometime next week."

"What's one thing got to do with the other? I can't work! You tell her to shut those windows when she's torturing that piano, you hear me?"

Walter didn't like the menace in Malcolm's voice. Slowly, he descended the stepladder with the practised sexuality of yesteryear's showgirl. Standing eyeball to eyeball with Malcolm, he said, "Mr. Brodsky, nobody talks to me like that." Walter was young and mus-

cular and he was very angry. The anger made him tremble and the building keys that hung from his belt tinkled.

"I'm sorry," said Malcolm, backing away. "But you know I'm a very nervous person. I can't stand noise. *Everybody* complained about Fenuski." That was the clarinet player. "Hasn't anybody else complained about this this this *thing*?"

Walter shook his head. "Maybe you're painting it worse then it is."

Malcolm drew himself up to his full five foot seven. "Very well, Walter," he said, "I'll take care of it myself."

Back in the apartment, he paced back and forth, building up a stronger head of steam. Eleven-H, whose name was Tansy Glunt (tansy? wasn't that a weed?), had entered her second hour of malpractice. Now she was attempting "Climb Every Mountain," and the ascent was as difficult and arduous as Hillary's attempt to conquer Everest. Malcolm was beating at his temple with his fists when the phone rang. It was Andy again.

"I thought you said you'd call right back." Andy was calm, collected, unruffled, and hungry. "If we're not meeting for dinner, I'd like to go out and do some food shopping."

Malcolm responded with a maniacal laugh that chilled Andy's spine. "Of course we're having dinner. I have to get *out* of this place. I'm going crazy!"

They made a date to rendezvous at Malcolm's favorite Italian restaurant on West Forty-eighth Street in thirty minutes, then Malcolm crossed to his desk, composed himself, and then composed a note.

"Hi there, Good Neighbor 11-H— welcome to the building!
Good luck in your valiant attempt to master the keyboard!
But could you kindly close your windows when doing your
exercises? Many many thanks!

—9-B"

An hour after the note had been slipped under her door, Tansy noticed it. Walter had rung her doorbell and before admitting him she picked up the note and read it. When Walter entered, she handed it to him. He read it, shrugged, set it on the foyer table, took her in his arms, and kissed her passionately.

Shortly after midnight, Malcolm came home. He rescued the note he had sent 11-H from the floor as he entered the apartment. Under

the note he had sent her, she had penciled, in an adolescent scrawl: "Sorry. My air-conditioner is on the fritz."

Malcolm let out a howl of rage as he crossed to his desk and under Tansy's note he scribbled in large block letters: "SO ARE YOU!"

He took the elevator to the eleventh floor and was about to slip the note back under Tansy's door when he heard muffled voices from within the apartment. One of the voices, which Malcolm recognized as Walter Midzik's, dripped with ardor. So he's added another scalp to his belt, thought Malcolm. He stared at the note in his hand and slowly crumpled it. He returned to his apartment and sat at the desk and looked up at her windows. In time the light went out. Walter leaned back, lost in thought.

For another two weeks, he continued to endure the torture. The exchange of notes continued, but even after Tansy Glunt's air-conditioner was repaired, her windows remained open. There was during this period a three-day heat wave and yet when she massacred the keyboard the windows were open. Malcolm tried canvassing some of the other tenants who might be affected by her fanatical fingers and succeeded in getting only three signatures on the petition he was circulating (he suspected they were three of Walter's abandoned conquests). He phoned the main office of the building management and was told that Tansy Glunt, by law, could be censured only if she was heard playing after eleven P.M. or before nine in the morning.

That night, at dinner in a Spanish restaurant in Greenwich Village, Andy was shocked at Malcolm's appearance. He hadn't seen him in a week. Where once there had been a buoyant, cherubic expression there were now dark circles under the eyes, a nervous twitch to the lips, and deep frown lines around the mouth.

"Now she's doing it on purpose," he muttered. Andy knew he meant Tansy Glunt. Tansy Glunt was now as much a part of Andy's life as was the President of the United States and the mayor of the city, both of whom Malcolm also disapproved of. "Now she plays every night at five for three hours and all day Saturday and Sunday, with no hope of going on tour."

Andy smiled. At least Malcolm was still in control of his sense of humor.

"I thought of packing a bag, making it known I was going away, and then slipping back in through the basement, figuring if she

thought I was out of town she'd give it a rest for a while. But then I'd be trapped in the apartment."

"I could slip you groceries."

"No, thanks. I've got a full freezer."

"Why don't you move?"

"Who can afford it?"

"Your sister will help you."

"She's helped me too much." He picked moodily at his paella. "And why should *I* move? I was there first!"

"She still entertaining the superintendent?"

"So the handyman tells me."

"Well, summer's almost over. She won't keep her windows open when it starts getting chilly."

"What are you talking about? July doesn't begin for three days!"

"Would you like the spare bedroom in my place for a while?"

"No! I mean no thanks." Malcolm drew himself up and a superior look took possession of his face. "I shall overcome."

One Saturday a week later, Walter Midzik was astonished to receive a call from Malcolm inviting him up for a drink, specifying Walter's favorite brand of bourbon. Walter couldn't resist. He entered Malcolm's apartment jauntily, the keys on his belt jingling merrily. It was six months until Christmas, but he was almost tinnabulating with a holiday spirit. Malcolm shut the door and gestured Walter to the sofa. On the coffee table was a glass of bourbon on the rocks. Walter took a deep swig and said, "Ah!"

"Good?" asked Malcolm, sitting across from him, holding what looked like a tumbler of vodka and ice.

"Very good," said Walter.

"Your girl friend's been quiet for the past two days."

"Girl friend?" Walter was very cool.

"Eleven-H," reminded Malcolm with an enigmatic smile.

"Oh. Oh, yeah. Very sad."

Malcolm sat up and asked eagerly, "Is she dead?"

"No, her mother died. She went to Pittsburgh for the funeral. She'll be back tomorrow."

Noiselessly, Malcolm's face fell. "I have to say, Walter, I'm very disappointed in you."

"How's that?" asked Walter, draining his glass and refilling it without invitation.

"I thought we were friends and here you are taking that woman's side against mine all because she's such easy pickings."

Walter felt the blood rushing to his face. "Miss Glunt is a very nice young lady. Okay, so she's got no talent. Okay, so she's giving you a hard time. But all them nasty notes you send her, and screaming out the window at her. And here just now you looked happy when you thought she was dead."

"Hmmm."

"What?"

"Nothing. You can't get her to close those windows?"

"I'm tired of asking her."

Malcolm sighed a very weary sigh and refilled Walter's glass. "You carry so many keys."

"Yeth." The bourbon appeared to be taking effect.

"I suppose they open all the doors in the whole building."

"Jus' this one," said Walter, fingering a particular key. "It's the mashter key."

"The master key?"

"The mashter key, yeah."

"Another drink?" Walter said nothing. Walter had passed out. "Another nice drink of your favorite bourbon laced with something special by yours truly?" Malcolm removed the master key from the ring attached to Walter's belt and carried the bottle of bourbon and Walter's glass to the kitchen. He poured the remainder of the bottle down the sink and threw the bottle into the trash bin. He scoured the glass until it belonged in a television commercial, then he returned to the living room, sat back down opposite Walter, glanced at his wristwatch, and waited.

The handyman found Walter's body in the courtyard in a grotesquely contorted position. The police, finding his toolbox open under the water tank, deduced he had fallen from the roof while doing some repairwork.

The next day Tansy Glunt returned from Pittsburgh, heard the tragic news about Walter from the doorman, and with a theatrical sob fled into an elevator. Entering her apartment, she found a note on the floor. This one was in a sealed envelope. With an unpleasant epithet, she tore it open, crossing to the piano by force of habit. "Welcome home," the note read, "I've been waiting anxiously. Look behind you."

Tansy spun around, but not quickly enough.

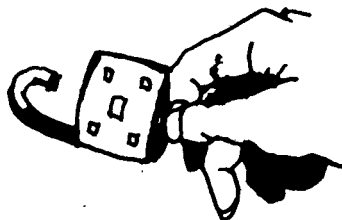
When her body was found in the courtyard half an hour later, it was widely assumed that grief over her lover Walter Midzik's death had driven her to suicide.

Two weeks later, Malcolm sat at his desk, the phone familiarly placed between chin and shoulder, staring up at the windows of 11-H. At the other end of the wire, Andy asked, "Do I hear drums and cymbals?"

"Yes," said Malcolm, his fingers counterpointing the percussion with an ominous succession of rat-a-tat's on the desk. "The new tenants in Eleven-H."

"Cheer up, Malcolm," said Andy, "perhaps they'll commit suicide too."

The blood drained from Malcolm's face as he thought, I wish he hadn't said that.



DETECTIVERSE

A STEAL

by M. EDWARD HOLDEN

He couldn't afford a .45—
The price was far too great.
So instead he bought a .32
Marked down from .38.

© 1982 by M. Edward Holden.

DEPARTMENT OF THIRD STORIES

Wherever Wayne was, his stepdaughter Sarah hoped he was suffering. He had killed her mother, she said—he had killed her by marrying her, and treating her like dirt, and he had killed her by leaving her . . .

WAITING FOR WAYNE

by **CHARLES R. McCONNELL**

The house was dead. I had seen its grim counterparts on hundreds of back roads, abandoned as dreams fell apart or death intruded, but my feeling was more than passing sadness prompted by the sight of a decaying, unwanted home. This was the death of a vital part of myself. This house had been my home.

I stood in the overgrown drive and looked at two decades of my life. It was impossible to tell that the house had once been white. A corner post had been broken away from the porch roof, and the porch roof, torn away from the house, dipped toward the ground. The building was a battered fighter with one knee on the canvas and no hope for a lifesaving bell.

Although it looked long deserted, the house had been lived in until just three months earlier by a sad lonely woman. My sister. I was told that when she was finally hospitalized against her will she appeared to be sixty years old. She was forty-three when she died.

"It wasn't any use talking to her, Uncle Steve," Sarah said to me after the funeral the previous day. "I tried hard to get Mom to come live with us. When that didn't work, Terry and I tried to get her to let us fix things up—like that porch, falling right off the house." Her shoulders drooped. "But the answer was always the same: 'I don't dare honey. Wayne'll be home one of these days.'"

Wayne. Always Wayne. I said, "It was in her letters, too."

"I never knew she wrote you," Sarah said.

"Just twice a year. My birthday and Christmas. The letters were

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always about you—how you did at school, your job at the library, Terry and your wedding and later the baby. But she always ended the same way: 'Not much new with me. Still scrubbing floors at the school, and still waiting for Wayne to come home.'

Sarah's eyes narrowed. "Wherever he is I hope he's suffering. He killed her. He killed her by marrying her and treating her like dirt, and he killed her by leaving. I had too many years of it—the drinking, the yelling, and all the times he hurt her!"

"He doesn't sound like much of a father," I said.

"Stepfather," she corrected. "Thank God his blood doesn't run in me." Hate showed through Sarah's brown eyes. "You weren't around, Uncle Steve. You don't know how bad it was. He'd be gone for days or weeks at a time. Then he'd come back and everything would be great for a day or two before it started all over again. And every time it got a little worse. After a while the only thing he did when he was sober—and that was hardly ever—was tinker with those damned cars of his."

I hadn't thought about Wayne's cars in years. "His old cars? The would-be classics?"

She nodded. "Take a look later. Both barns, full and locked up." She paused, looked vacantly ahead, then said, "His cars. His stinking, precious cars. He never put a minute's work into the house but he made sure the barns were kept up." She sighed and stretched her arms and flexed her fingers as though chasing away unwanted tension. "Anyway," she added, "you'll get to check out the great *classics*—the place is yours now."

I shook my head. "It was mine and Maggie's together, so her part is yours."

"Uh-uh," she said. "I don't want it—and I don't need it. And Terry respects that. The legal part's already being taken care of."

"I don't know what to do with it. My home's going to be an army base for nine more years. Until I get my thirty in."

"Then sell it. Sell the cars, if they're any good. Or shove everything into the old ore bed out back. Get rid of two eye-sores at once and leave the land at peace."

I watched the tall, buxom Sarah as she spoke. At every mention of Wayne or his cars the anger returned to her eyes. "What is it about the cars?" I asked. "They seem to be a sore spot."

"More like a cancer," she snapped. "It was what they stood for, I guess. His life. His love. He put them first—before everything and

everyone. When I was ten he beat me half to death just for playing in them."

My eyebrows asked for more.

"I got hold of the barn keys one day and I was playing in the cars. Just getting in and out, pretending I was driving, kid things. He came home and caught me and beat me. Then he slapped Mom around for trying to stop him, and he swore he'd kill anyone who ever went into the barns. He put on new locks."

"I know he was wild as a young man, but I never knew him to hit anyone."

"You don't know how much he changed. You weren't here to see it."

Was there accusation in her voice, in the thin line of her mouth? She must have read my face. Her mouth softened and she said, "I hated you, too, for running out on your sister. But when I was sixteen I finally got Mom to talk about my mysterious Uncle Steve and she told me about the—the trouble. I understood why you couldn't come back."

"I tried, right after prison. But I wasn't welcome and I had to live, so I joined the Army. I was lucky to get in, considering my record."

"And Mom never told you what was going on?"

I shook my head. "Nothing, except once when I came to see her shortly after Wayne left. All she said was that Wayne tried to hurt you. I know I should have come more often." My guilt was catching up with me—two visits to my only family in twenty years is a rotten record.

"He did try to hurt me. And more," said Sarah. I didn't like the look that came over her, the way she seemed to shrink back as she hugged herself with both arms. "It was that last night. The night he went away for good."

I felt I should stop her, but I know my expression asked for more. I couldn't help wanting to know.

"I could see the way he was looking at me," she said. Her head jerked from side to side as she talked, her body denying her words. "I was only twelve, but I was already tall and just about as—mature as now. I couldn't stand for him to put his hand on my arm. I could see what he wanted."

"You don't have to talk about this," I said.

"I have to, I think. I've never even told Terry. Anyway, not much happened, thank God."

"But he tried to attack you?"

She bit her lip and nodded. "Mom was in bed. I was in the kitchen making my lunch for school the next day when he came in. He'd been drinking, but he was dressed in a suit like he was ready to go away again. A new *selling trip*—" her lip curled—"and some other woman, I suppose."

She went on. "Anyway, he tried to get me to drink with him and kept saying things about how I'd grown up, how Dan Langley's kid was a woman now.

"He grabbed me and pinned me against the counter and tried to kiss me. I slapped him as hard as I could. He punched me in the face and I screamed—"

I put my hand on her arm. "Stop, Sarah. Please."

She squeezed back her tears and sniffed, "It's okay. There really isn't any more. He had me bent over the counter, just hitting and hitting, and I just screamed. I think I tried to hit back, but I blacked out.

"The next thing I remember was waking up on the sofa and hearing a car pull away. Then Mom came in and took care of my face. She was crying, and she said Wayne was gone. We never saw him again."

In some families everything happens at once. In one horrible summer twenty-five years ago our lives came completely apart in a few weeks. First our parents died in a wreck on their way to work at the cannery. Then Maggie, seventeen, newly married and newly pregnant, lost her husband in an Air Force training accident.

Several months later, just after Sarah was born, Maggie underwent surgery for a life-long problem in her right arm. The operation was only partly successful, so Maggie was left with a normal-appearing right arm that she couldn't lift higher than her shoulder and a hand that wouldn't completely close.

For a while it was the three of us—myself, working at the cannery; baby Sarah, growing like a weed; and Maggie, caring for Sarah and cooking and cleaning. Then Wayne came along.

Wayne was a young good-looking farm-equipment salesman. He came to us looking for barn space to rent to store three automobiles he had just bought. Maggie smiled and looked twice at the first man to make her take notice since Dan's death.

Wayne—at least according to his boss at the farm-equipment dealership—was "the best damned salesman in the county, if you can keep him away from the booze and the broads." However, marriage

to Maggie didn't dent his drinking and it didn't keep him away from other women for much more than six months. And before those six months had passed I was out of the picture.

After the wedding Wayne moved in with us. I was impressed with Wayne, thought he was everything I wasn't. Handsome, fast-talking, boldly confident, he was a natural salesman. He could also drink circles around me, and I made the mistake of trying to be like him.

We drank a lot at home but that didn't last. When the arguments got noisy—we both fought with Maggie—we started doing our drinking away from home. Three, four, five nights a week. Until the night I was pulled from my old Ford, half wrapped around a tree, and carted off to the hospital where several hours later I was charged with vehicular homicide by a magistrate standing at my bedside.

My memory of the night was a jumble of scraps and blanks. We had taken two cars—my Ford and Wayne's Plymouth—because Wayne worked late and I met him in town. We were supposed to have tried to start a fight, but I didn't remember. I did remember calling a bartender a few choice names when he ordered me out of his place.

The next thing I remembered was Wayne laughing, reaching through my car window to insert the key that my fingers couldn't control. He slapped my shoulder and yelled, "You'll be easy to beat tonight—while I'm beating the hundred-thousand mark!"

We had talked about it off and on all evening. Wayne's lovingly tended customized Plymouth would roll up its one-hundred-thousandth mile before we got home. As for beating *me*, Wayne usually won when we raced home. This time it wasn't even a race—his taillights were mere dots by the time I found my way through the gears and roared off after him.

Then there was a jolt so severe I nearly bit through my tongue. I lost control and left the road. I didn't recall the impact. I remembered only the tree racing in to fill my vision.

I was convicted in a one-day trial. It was more than three years before I got out and returned home. Wayne wasn't there. Maggie claimed he had "straightened up some" but was gone much of the time on the road as a manufacturer's representative. She never once spoke of what had happened.

I didn't stay. There was no work. There were *jobs*, but none for me. In this community you don't get drunk and take a car and grind a beloved elder citizen into the pavement and expect to be forgiven simply because the legal penalty has been paid. I was home less

than a week when I was waylaid and beaten senseless by three men wearing hoods.

I left town and joined the Army. I never found much there, but it was better than anything I could have known at home.

I looked at the single key Sarah had given me. Dreading to enter my past, I slipped the key back into my pocket and walked slowly around to the back of the house.

What had once been a neat yard, a small square cut out of the unused fields, was overgrown with weeds. Sarah had been right about the barns. Both looked solid, both had been reroofed at least once since my youth. The smaller barn, closest to the house, was a square, gable-roof structure. The door was secured with a heavy padlock covered by a flap of rotted innertube rubber.

The larger barn—traditional gambrel roof and all—sat at the back of the yard. It was likewise closed with a sturdy padlock. Through narrow cracks between the boards I could barely make out two or three rows of dark mounded shapes. The tops of Wayne's automobiles.

I left the barn and struggled through the field to the other out-buildings. There were two sheds, a large chicken coop, and another small barn. These had been unused and in bad shape when the folks bought the place, and my father sometimes spoke of tearing them down. The small barn was filled with junk—pieces of furniture, an old refrigerator, and other castoffs of daily living.

In a strangely neat row behind the junk barn were the battered, rusted-out partial bodies of four cars out of the 1930s. These were leftover junk from the farm's previous owners.

A short distance farther into the field, perhaps a hundred yards from the main barn, was the ore bed Sarah had spoken of. There were actually three of these on the property, crude canyons bordered on one side by mounds of earth and rock overgrown with trees and brush. The area had been worked for pockets of iron ore in the days long before strip-mining laws required that those who so scarred the earth restore it to a semblance of its former state.

I realized I was starting to think like I belonged here when it crossed my mind that I would have to demolish the tumbledown buildings, get rid of the rusted car hulks, and fill the ore bed. However, as I stared down at perhaps ten feet of murky brown water it struck me that the first thing to be consigned as landfill should be

my past—hurts, resentments, regrets, and all. I pulled myself away from the bank and went to the house.

My tour of the house was rapid. At least four rooms—living room, bath, kitchen, and one bedroom—were neat although dusty. There wasn't much in them except Maggie's scant possessions. I went through everything quickly but carefully, finding myself trying not to upset Maggie's way of things. I don't know what I was looking for unless it was something that would tell me about Maggie, why she cut herself off from most of the world and why she hung on waiting for the return of a man who had brought her nothing but grief.

Until I looked into a fifth room I hadn't known that Wayne and Maggie had used separate rooms. There wasn't much in this room, either. Two good suits, now old and covered with dust. Some other clothes. Three unopened bottles of whisky. A short stack of girlie magazines and a taller stack of automotive magazines. And a sheet-metal box that rattled like it was full of small hardware.

I carried the box to the kitchen in search of something to open it with. I found that some things never change—the same two kitchen drawers that had held the tools a quarter-century earlier were still filled with hand tools. I selected a heavy screwdriver and forced the box open. It was filled with keys.

Car keys. They were in sets on paperclips, most of them tagged with homemade pasteboard tags. The tags were labeled. There was a *Corvair-Blue*, a *Corvair-Tan*, a *57 Chev. Conv.*, a *55 Chev. 4 dr.*, a *LaSalle*, a *T-Bird*, a *49 Ford*, and a number of others. Altogether there were twenty-six sets of keys, all tagged except for one set. These two unidentified keys bore *GM* imprints and hung on a ring attached to a soft leather fob.

I gathered up the keys. I thought it was time I looked at the barns, but I didn't know where to find the keys to the barn locks.

I went back through the bedrooms and looked in every other place I could think of. I even emptied the two tool drawers in the kitchen. No more keys.

With the box of car keys under my arm I gathered up a rusted hacksaw, a hammer, a pair of pliers, and three large screwdrivers. I walked out to the small barn. It took me only a minute with the saw to realize it would take hours to get through the hardened steel padlock, so I tried to remove the rusted bolts of the hasp with a screwdriver. No luck.

I took my tools to the door of the main barn. The frame was thick and the hasp was held by four large screws. The going was tough, but in fifteen minutes I had three of the screws out. The fourth screw wouldn't turn and I used my largest screwdriver as a crowbar and chisel to loosen it. Nearly half an hour later I was able to slide the claw of the hammer under the head of the screw and tear the hasp free.

Hinges protested as I strained to open the large door. Sunlight fell on the trunk of a white Buick convertible parked so close to the threshold that the door must have been touching it.

There were three rows of cars—seven against the far wall, six in the middle row, and seven in the nearest row. The white Buick filled a center space that looked as though it was intended for access to the inner two rows. Nothing could be moved unless the Buick was moved first.

Two cars to my right was a two-seat Thunderbird from the 1950s. Next to that was a LaSalle, 1939 or 1940. I also recognized an early-'50s Studebaker nearby.

There was barely enough room to walk between the rows and between the cars within the rows. The Buick, with a pocket of unused space in front of it, left barely enough room to edge sideways between it and the cars on either side. Most of the space in the barn was so well used it must have taken two dozen maneuvers to put some of the cars into place.

For little more than the curiosity of finding out what keys went with which cars, I began fitting keys to door locks. In twenty minutes I had a set of keys hanging from the door lock of every car in the barn except two—the Buick convertible and a car in the farthest corner of the barn, probably a Chrysler product from the late '40s or early '50s.

It struck me that a number of Wayne's cars would be worth a few dollars but so far I had seen nothing that would explain—at least to me—his fierce protectiveness of his property. But I had yet to look at everything. There was still the other barn, the Buick, and the car in the corner.

I began in the corner so I could take advantage of the afternoon sun while it slanted through the open door. The car was so close to the barn wall I had to approach it on the passenger's side.

When I reached the trunk I identified the car as a 1950 Plymouth. I ran my hand along the fender, and even through the years of dust I could feel the smoothness of lacquer, a costly hand-rubbed finish.

The touch of the car was a touch of the past. It was Wayne's Plymouth from twenty-five years earlier.

The passenger door was unlocked. I squeezed in and slid across the dusty seat.

The sunlight was moving on. A knife of light cut diagonally across the hood but the car's interior was shadowed. Remembering the big thing we once made about Wayne's Plymouth passing 100,000 miles, I groped for a match, struck a light, and sought the odometer. There were six spaces; the odometer was meant to start over after 99,999.9 miles. It showed 1.3 miles.

The Plymouth had not been driven since that horrible night my life came apart.

I shook out the match. Wondering, I stared out across the hood into the retreating wedge of sunlight. It was then that I noticed the irregularity in the line of the hood.

Ten minutes later I knew what had happened twenty-five years earlier. I wasn't blameless. I had been driving dead drunk, and I surely ran over the old woman—but *after* Wayne had run her down at high speed.

I was shaken but I felt no anger. Everything was too far behind me. Besides, I reasoned, I wasn't yet finished putting my ghosts to rest.

I made my way back to the door of the barn, laid out the remaining keys on the trunk of the Buick, and counted them. There were eight sets of keys remaining—seven tagged sets, and the GM keys on the leather fob.

I stepped backward through the doorway and looked at the rear of the Buick. It was then that I noticed the license plate, dated the year Wayne went away. I quickly checked enough of the others to convince myself that the Buick was the only car bearing plates. I then realized that the Buick was out of place in another way—it was much newer than anything else in the barn.

I tried the GM keys. The first key entered the lock but wouldn't turn. The remaining key opened the door.

There was a ring of keys dangling from the Buick's ignition. On the back seat were two dusty suitcases. I removed the ignition keys, pulled the bags from the car, and took everything outdoors.

The bags were full of Wayne's belongings—three suits, socks, underwear, ties, a bottle of Scotch, and shaving gear. There was a cracked vinyl folio of papers which I quickly flipped through. It

seemed that Wayne had been "presently available"—as he put it—and looking for saleswork.

I looked at the keys I had taken from the car. Two GM keys matched the pair on the fob. There were four additional keys, and the second one I tried opened the padlock dangling from the hasp I had torn from the door frame.

Too many odd factors came together and began to make sense. The keys and clothes shouldn't have been there. The convertible, perhaps deserving a place in the barn, shouldn't have been parked where it was and shouldn't have had plates on it. I went back to the Buick and tried the remaining GM key in the trunk.

I found Wayne. Dry, offensive particles of past life stirred by the motion of the trunk lid and the outside air rose up around me. After thirteen years in the trunk of the car he was little more than rag-clothed bones.

It was old death, removed in time, drained of much of its horror. After the initial shock I felt I might have been viewing a macabre wax exhibit rather than the remains of a real person. The body—if I may so describe it—lay on its side in a fetal position. The wooden handle of a heavy kitchen knife protruded from the suit's breast pocket. I tugged at the lapel only to have the fabric begin to separate between my fingers. The blade had probably traveled slightly downward and into the center of the chest.

"Uncle Steve! Oh, God!"

My heart thumped as I whirled about. My mind had been thirteen years away as Sarah came up behind me.

She fell into my arms, twisting her face away from the specter in the trunk. "Oh God," she moaned, "oh, God." I turned her away from the car and held her as her trembling subsided.

At last she said, "I—we—Terry's in the car—we came to tell you that the lawyer wants to see you tomorrow. And to—ask you to dinner tonight." She stepped back from me. "Is that—I mean, is it—him?"

I nodded. "It couldn't be anyone else."

"But how?" Her eyes widened. "Oh, poor Mom. No wonder she wouldn't leave. She told me that awful night he'd never hurt me again."

"She knew he wouldn't be back."

She averted her face.

I went on, "That night he tried to attack you. You said you woke up on the sofa and heard a car pull away before your mother came

in. How long was it after the sound of the car that she came in? Right away? Ten minutes or more? Can you remember?"

She shook her head. "It's always been fuzzy. Like not knowing if you're awake or asleep, hearing sounds but having no idea of time. I just don't know, Uncle Steve."

"Okay. No matter." I stepped back and closed the trunk. "Forget this, if you ever can. Forget what she did for you. She's gone, and there's no need to change anybody's memory of her with this."

"She really must have loved me," Sarah said quietly. "She stayed here with this—secret—all these years."

I took her arm and guided her toward the car where Terry sat. A few steps away from it she turned and said, "Seven tonight. Be there?"

"Yes. You sure you're okay?"

She managed a weak smile. "I'm okay, but—she really must have loved me."

She got into the car. Terry waved and I waved back. I watched them drive away.

You'll never know how much, I thought.

Memory can be a remarkable defense against the intolerable. I could imagine the night. A twelve-year-old, but full grown. A child in a robust woman's body, in danger, frightened beyond reason, hysterical, pinned against the kitchen counter trying instinctively to fight back.

I didn't have to be an expert to know that Wayne was killed with a downward thrust by a right-handed person, not by a small woman who couldn't raise her right arm above her shoulder.

I went to the barn and set the suitcases inside and closed the door.

I had twenty-six days' leave time left. It would be simple enough to rent some equipment. In a few days the Buick convertible would rest on the bottom of the ore bed beneath a few rusted hulks and the remains of the tumbledown outbuildings.

Sarah would have no reason to ever again probe the black spot in her memory, to reflect on one horrible night years past, so perhaps that which was lost could remain lost. Best that she never fully understand how very much her mother loved her.

"Q"

a **NEW** short story by

JOAN AIKEN

All the violence Simon inflicted on the garden, Aunt Susan (who was really his wife's aunt) said, was actually an attack on his late mother, because when he was a child she used to wash his face and scold him and make him finish the fat on his meat and go to bed when he'd rather stay up . . .

SOMETHING VERY OBSESSIONAL

by **JOAN AIKEN**

All their friends said, and thought as well, that the young Caraways were a delightful couple—simple, unpretentious, easy to please, fond of all kinds of fun, happy in their uncomplicated lives. Not intellectual, not snobbish, not avant-garde, not reactionary. There was really nothing at all wrong with the Caraways. They lived in a charming Queen Anne cottage on the edge of Pinchester, a delightful country town. Delia taught in the local primary school, but the pair hadn't been married very long and everyone felt it was only a matter of time before a few even younger Caraways were born, and then Delia, so home-loving, so maternal, so natural, would certainly give up her job and devote herself to her children.

Simon Caraway had been an insurance agent, and quite good at it, but just for fun he had written a thriller and shown it to a friend who had connections with a publishing house. The manuscript was read, approved, published, and did most creditably. So now Simon found himself launched on a comfortable and lucrative career producing a suspense novel every nine months.

To friends who exclaimed in amazement, "Where do you get your

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ideas? How in the world do you think up those awful plots in such a peaceful little spot as Pinchester?" he pointed out that all he needed to do was read the national and local press every day. Headlines such as AMUSEMENT PARK DUMMY PROVES TO BE CORPSE OF SHOT MAN, EX-TEACHER JAILED FOR DRUG-RUNNING, GYPSY CURSE WORRIES LOCAL COUNCIL, ROBOT RUNS AMOK IN LAB, KILLS 5, WIDOWER INSTALLS CLOSED-CIRCUIT LINE TO WIFE'S TOMB, WIFE SUCCEEDS AT FIFTH ATTEMPT TO POISON HUSBAND kept him amply supplied with ideas for plots.

So, year after year, Simon's books continued to appear in their black-and-honey-colored jackets. "The new Simon Caraway" was always in demand at every library, and, although not affluent, the couple lived very comfortably, since their tastes were far from expensive. Delia did all the housework and cooking herself. Simon grew, in their half acre of garden, nearly all the vegetables they consumed, for he made a practice of writing only in the morning hours, devoting afternoons to exercise, and so keeping his health and youthful appearance.

Life went on with them pleasantly and tranquilly until the death of Uncle Paul Palliser. Paul and Susan Palliser had taken care of Delia when she was a child, her parents having perished in a motor accident, so it was natural for her to say to Simon: "Poor dear Aunt Susan, I can't bear to think of her living alone, she's such a sociable person. Would you mind terribly, Simon, if I invited her to come and live with us? There is the whole top floor."

There was. For the expected little Caraways had, somehow, never materialized. Delia and Simon kept meaning to convert the space to a self-contained flat and rent it to a teacher or student from the local college of education, but somehow they had never got round to it.

It was equally natural for good-natured Simon to reply, "Poor old Aunt Susan, she must be feeling terribly at a loose end. She used to do everything for old Paul. Of course, darling, go ahead and invite her if you want to. Heaven knows there's room for a whole army of aunts up on the top floor."

So Aunt Susan was invited and piled all her worldly goods into a van and came. And within a fortnight she was so settled into the life of Pinchester that it was hard to remember she had not always been there.

She was exceedingly fond of the young couple downstairs, and touchingly anxious to make herself useful to them. She offered to

cat-sit (since there was no baby); she offered to help with the housework; she offered to share in the gardening; she wanted to be a functioning member of the household in every possible way. The only hindrance to this was that the young Caraways were so self-sufficient already.

However, Aunt Susan had her own resources. She made petit-point, and she was a corresponding member of several Psychological Societies and found some local clubs of a similar nature to join. She attended lectures, gave them herself, and seemed happy and occupied enough.

But after a while Simon Caraway, though he would not dream of finding fault with his wife's aunt who was as well meaning as she could possibly be, found it in his heart to wish that she would not explain his own mental processes to him quite so often. If he broke the handle off a cup, she would say, "Ah, that was a protest. Delia set a small teacup for you and you subconsciously wanted a large cup of tea." If he bruised himself chopping kindling or pulled a muscle while digging or suffered one of the other minor injuries to which all gardeners are liable, she would say, "That's because you wanted a pretext for not coming to the town council meeting with Delia and me in order to stay comfortably at home and watch the western on TV." If he forgot something, she could always supply a reason for his absent-mindedness, generally a discreditable one. And if he employed logic in countering her suggestions, she said his logic only masked and rationalized some deep-down unacknowledged atavistic motive.

Simon bore this good-temperedly enough until Aunt Susan started in on his thrillers. She hadn't read any of them before coming to live with her niece. She wasn't in the habit of reading much fiction at all, and certainly none in the blood-and-thunder genre, but she was a conscientious and well-mannered person—she felt that since she was now living under his roof it was incumbent upon her to make herself familiar with her nephew-in-law's work. So she purchased half a dozen of his paperbacks, took them to bed with her one night, and worked her way doggedly through them.

Since she had read nothing of this nature before, they had an extremely drastic effect on her. From that day on, she regarded Simon with a new eye.

"I'm afraid, Simon dear, that you have some terribly deep unresolved conflicts inside you," was her inaugural statement.

"I'm quite sure you're wrong, Aunt Susan," he blithely replied.

"Or if I have my subconscious has managed to keep them awfully well concealed from me until now. I'm really very happy and satisfied with my life, you know—I love Delia, I love this house and town, I love the garden, I make a good living, I haven't a care in the world."

"If only you could get at that subterranean layer of turbulence," she sighed. "Really it's *terrifying*—the evidence of it is so apparent in your writing."

"So," he pointed out, "aren't I lucky? It's extremely lucrative. *The Curse on Clapham Common* has just sold to an American book club for thirty thousand dollars and *The Deadly Dummy* is going into a third printing. And they're negotiating for film rights to *Telex to the Tomb*."

"I'm afraid you don't have any conception of just how serious, how terribly dangerous this may be. I *wish* you would go to an analyst, Simon—just to indulge me, just to set my mind at rest."

"But—dear Aunt—just suppose he analyzed all my deep subconscious conflicts out of me. Then how would I earn a living? I don't suppose I'd be able to get back into the insurance business now—and I'd hate to live on Delia's earnings."

"Well," sighed Aunt Susan, "perhaps if you did something *really* creative for at least part of the time—for you can hardly say that writing these bloodcurdling little books is a suitable activity for a full-grown, adult human being. If you were to give up writing even for a few months that might straighten you out and make a tremendous difference."

"Well," he said thoughtfully, "I daresay I *could* leave off writing for a few months. *The Curse* is doing uncommonly well and a few months without earning might make a useful tax loss. But what kind of creative activity did you have in mind, Aunt Susan?"

Hand-weaving was what Aunt Susan had in mind, it appeared. In no time at all she had a large loom installed in the dining room, the furniture was squeezed into one corner and Simon was receiving instruction from one of Aunt Susan's new acquaintances, a neighboring lady who was a weaving enthusiast. And so, for several months each day after breakfast, instead of going to rattle away at the typewriter in his study, Simon would go instead to what was now known as the loom room, and the clonk and thud of the shuttle could be heard instead—and sometimes Simon's muttered curses, when his warp and woof got into some particularly intractable tangle. He didn't take naturally to the weaver's craft and the rugs and lengths of tapestry he produced were uniformly hideous. But he saw

that his compliance gave both his wife and her aunt considerable gratification, so he persevered.

But this success did not, curiously enough, satisfy Aunt Susan. Although he had exchanged writing for weaving, Simon remained essentially the same bland, easygoing, unassailable character, and she felt that her remedy had proved merely cosmetic. The real deep-down problem was still untouched. So she now extended her campaign to include his gardening activities.

"There's something very *obsessional*, don't you think, about the way you mow and mow that lawn?" she said to Simon.

"The grass grows uncommonly fast in June," he pointed out.

"Ah, but don't you *see*, my dear boy, the motives go much deeper than you realize. All that cutting, clipping, pruning, hoeing, slashing, *chopping* you do—can't you see what it's really aimed at?"

"The garden," said Simon.

"The garden is only a symbol. Can't you grasp that concept? Don't you see whom the garden really represents?"

"No, I can't say that I do."

"Your mother!" said Aunt Susan triumphantly. "All this violence inflicted on the garden is really the manifestation of profound feelings of hostility—and consequent guilt—towards your mother!"

"But she's dead."

"That makes no difference. That only makes it more complicated. Because she isn't here in person you have to take it out on the garden. Just *look* how short you cut those borders!"

"That was so I wouldn't have to do them again for ten days."

"No, Simon dear, you were really attacking your mother, because when you were a child she used to wash your face and scold you and make you finish the fat on your meat and go to bed when you'd rather stay up."

"Actually," said Simon, thinking it over, "I was pretty fond of my ma. She was a great one for larks. We used to have a lot of good times when I was a boy."

"Ah! That's what you *think*! But deep down, buried, almost forgotten, you will find there are all kinds of other memories—of struggles, and anger, and rage, and hatred. Now what you must do is stop gardening for a few months and try—*really try hard*—to recall all those unresolved conflicts. You will be truly surprised at what a difference it will make."

"Oh, yes, darling, *do try*," said Delia, who was beginning to be

won round to Aunt Susan's point of view, since she heard it morning, noon, and night.

So for two months Simon stopped his gardening activities and sat in the greenhouse trying to remember forgotten quarrels with his mother.

The first result of this was that the garden became overgrown with enormous weeds. But Simon manfully ignored them, wrestling with his obdurate subconscious, which continued to refuse to yield any memories of familial conflict. What it did produce instead, night after night, were a number of remarkably vivid dreams, which he would relate at breakfast.

"I dreamed I saw you drowning again, Aunt Susan. This time it wasn't in the sea, but in a huge jar of Golden Syrup. The syrup had just reached your chin when I woke up."

"That's excellent—extremely satisfactory," Aunt Susan responded with great cordiality. "You are really beginning to cooperate. The dream shows a repressed wish to murder Delia. All husbands wish to murder their wives at some point in the marriage."

"Oh? Then why should I dream it was you who was drowning?"

"You were using me as a substitute-figure. The subconscious always prefers to conceal its real impulses."

By now August had come, and Simon suggested a picnic by the sea.

Unfortunately, while Simon and Aunt Susan were dozing after the picnic lunch, Delia, who adored bathing, swam an injudicious distance out to sea, was seized by cramps, and drowned before she could be rescued. Everybody knew what a devoted couple the young Caraways had been and the deepest sympathy was expressed by the coroner and all Simon's friends.

But Aunt Susan said, "I'm afraid, Simon dear, that poor Delia must have absorbed too deeply the knowledge of your subconscious wish to drown her. I am not saying she deliberately committed suicide—dear Delia was too strong, too brave a character to do such a thing as that—but the awareness of your feelings must have contributed to her mental and physical state. Those cramps were a psychosomatic response to that knowledge. It is something you will just have to live with, I am afraid."

"No," said Simon, "for once you are wrong, Aunt Susan."

"How do you mean, my dear boy? You cannot seriously be suggesting that Delia killed herself?"

"No indeed I'm not. I put two tablespoonfuls of powdered glass into her egg-salad sandwich. That was what gave her the cramps."

"Simon! You must be joking! You can't mean what you say?"

"I'm perfectly serious," said Simon. "I began to see that if your theories were correct drowning Delia was the only solution to my problem."

"What?"

"The only difficulty," he went on, "is that now I find drowning Delia was evidently not the solution."

"What do you mean?" Aunt Susan asked.

"My dreams," Simon explained. "I still keep dreaming about *your* death, Aunt Susan. Only now the death has changed its form. I keep dreaming that you're being smothered in a hand-woven rug. And what," he inquired, picking up a large hideous hand-woven rug he had recently completed and advancing on his wife's aunt in a decidedly menacing manner, "do you suggest I should do about that, Aunt Susan?"



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D2EB2

a **NEW** short story by

BARBARA OWENS

Richard was into astronomy the summer he was sent to stay with his grandparents. He'd been given a small telescope for his birthday. First he set it up in his back-bedroom window, but the next night he found a much better viewpoint from the roof.

An unusual story about an imaginative 12-year-old boy, his grandparents' neighbor Kate Willett, and her loyal German shepherd Danny Boy—from Barbara Owens, whose first short story, "The Cloud Beneath the Eaves" (EQMM, January 1978), earned an Edgar from the Mystery Writers of America as best mystery short story of the year . . .

SILENT WITNESS

by **BARBARA OWENS**

I saw two murders committed the summer I was twelve. Nine years ago—and I never told anyone. Some people might say that's wrong, but the way it turned out I don't think so. Chances are no one would have believed half of it anyway.

My mother needed an operation that year, so Dad decided it'd be easier for everyone if I spent the summer with my grandparents in Brownwood. That suited me fine. I liked my grandparents and after being shut up in a city apartment all year I was ready for their big three-story house and climbing trees in the yard. My grandfather was president of the local bank. My grandmother wasn't a great fussier, except for a never-ending determination to fatten me up. That was the first thing she said that summer: "Why, Richard, you must've grown a foot! We'll have to put some meat on those bones of yours."

© 1982 by Barbara Owens.

I was into astronomy that year. I'd gotten a small telescope for my birthday, and one of the things I looked forward to was studying the night sky away from so many city lights. What with that, my grandmother's cooking, and a couple of boys my age I'd met on previous visits, it promised to be a good summer.

And it started out that way. For the first few days Grandma kept me busy working in the yard and garden when I wasn't with Bob or Jerry. When I was with Bob and Jerry we played ball, went to the movies, smoked cigarettes when we could find some. It must have been the second week before I got around to setting up the telescope in my bedroom window.

My room was on the back of the house. Just outside stood a large maple tree that was fine for shade but not much good for seeing stars through. I tried every position, but the best sighting I could get was a little corner of the sky. The next night it occurred to me I'd have a much better vantage point from the roof. My grandparents were already asleep across the hall at the front of the house, so I strapped on the scope's case and out the window I went, into the maple and up a few branches until I could step back out onto the roof. It was steep, but a few feet above my bedroom two attic dormer windows stuck out side by side and between them a space of four feet or so flattened out to form the roof of my room's bay window.

It was a perfect spot for stargazing, and once I was set I couldn't believe how clear the sky was. I located Scorpius right away, then the Hercules star cluster, and finally the biggest prize of all—Saturn. And it really did have rings. I remember feeling like king of the universe up there, half hidden by the maple tree and the two attic windows, all alone with the night and sky.

As soon as my grandparents were in bed the next night, I went up there again. I knew enough not to tell them what I was doing—I had a feeling they wouldn't appreciate me climbing all over that steep roof in the dark.

The night was warm and quiet. After an hour or so of watching, I leaned back against the steep pitch of the roof, just enjoying where I was and the fact that no one knew I was there.

New people lived on the top two floors in the house behind my grandparents. The first floor was vacant. There was a woman sitting at her kitchen table. She didn't seem to be doing anything, just looking into space. On one side of her lived the Peters'—I remembered them. They had a little girl about five who was always throwing toys over our back fence and we'd have to toss them back. Jerry's

house was on the other side of the woman in her kitchen. He was in his bedroom with the radio on. I could hear the music, and pretty soon he started singing with it. Then he began to dance. I almost laughed out loud; I knew he'd be embarrassed if he knew I was watching.

After a while he turned off his light. The little girl's house was already dark. But the woman in her kitchen still sat at the table looking into space.

I was about to climb back down to my room when I saw her move. She turned her head and was talking. A dog reared up with his front paws on the table. She put her arms around him and hugged him, then she picked up a brush and began brushing him all over. He was beautiful, a German shepherd, and he looked like he really enjoyed it.

Next morning I was hoeing Grandma's potatoes when I heard a door close. I looked over the fence. The woman and the dog were coming down the back porch steps. He really was pretty, about half grown. His feet were still too big for the rest of him, and he didn't run, he bounced. He wanted her to play—he'd run away, then run back, kneeling on his front legs, his rear end in the air, his tail wagging like mad. She picked up a stick and threw it, and he fell all over himself trying to catch it. He looked so funny that I laughed, and she looked over and saw me.

"Hi," she said, and I said, "hi."

"Who're you?"

"My name's Richard. I'm staying with my grandparents. That your dog?"

She threw the stick again. This time he caught it—the crunch of his teeth snapped it in two, and he looked so surprised we both laughed.

"Yes, that's Danny Boy."

"Can I pet him?"

"Sure. Come on over. Just climb the fence, it's okay."

He only let me pet him for a minute, then he was off again, running in big circles around the yard. The woman was smiling. She seemed older than my mother, but not as old as Grandma. The skirt she had on was wrinkled and the blouse was ripped. Her hair wasn't combed and her eyes were all red around the edges.

"You like dogs?"

"Oh, yeah. Especially German shepherds. I've always wanted one,

but my mom says no. She says they're one-man dogs and liable to go mean."

"Oh, I don't believe that. Not if you treat them right." She smiled at me, almost shy. "Want to see what Danny Boy can do?"

"Sure," I told her.

She picked up a sawed-off broomstick lying in the grass and tossed it into the air. Like a flash Danny Boy was up there, clamping it between his teeth. Then, instead of bringing it back to her to throw again, he tossed it himself, over and over, snapping it up with his big neck and catching it in midair with his strong jaws.

"That's his favorite toy, that old broomstick. He can go on like that forever. Now, watch this. Danny, put it away. Go on, put it away."

With the broom handle sticking out both sides of his mouth, Danny Boy trotted up the back steps and laid it on the top one, aligning it carefully with the step's edge.

"Not there, silly. Somebody'll step on it and fall. Inside. Open the door."

And he did, grasping the knob in his jaws and twisting till the latch clicked and he pushed it open. He picked up the stick and carried it inside, bouncing back outside and down to her immediately for approval.

She got down on her knees and hugged him, rubbing her face in his shiny coat. "Isn't he something? What a sweetheart, what a good boy Danny is."

My grandmother called me then and I had to leave. I thought about Danny Boy and the woman all afternoon—about how she'd looked sitting at her kitchen table the night before and how tired and red her eyes were.

That night at supper I asked Grandpa. "Who lives in the house out back? They weren't there last year."

Grandpa looked up from his paper. "Couple by the name of Willett. Why?"

"They've got a German shepherd. His name's Danny Boy. He can open doors with his teeth."

"Ugh!" Grandma said. "I wouldn't let a dog slobber all over my doorknobs."

"Smart dogs, German shepherds. About the smartest, I understand, except maybe collies. Some folks swear they can almost reason." He looked at me over the top of his glasses. "But I'd advise you to stay away from there, Richard. Kate's all right, I guess, but

Jack Willett's a mean one and crooked as a snake—he owes half the people in this town."

"I never understood why a woman would stay with a man like that," Grandma said. "Makes you wonder about her, doesn't it?" In a soft aside to me, she added, "He drinks."

Two or three nights later I got my first look at Jack Willett. In the meantime, I'd found out from Jerry that he had a traveling job and when he was home all he wanted to do was fight. Jerry heard his mother tell his dad that Jack thought Kate had boy friends over while he was gone. Nobody in the neighborhood had seen any, but Jerry's mom said it would serve Jack right if she did.

That night Jerry's parents had company. They were playing cards around the dining table and I'd been trying to see the card faces with my telescope, but it wouldn't bring them in right and I gave up. The Peters' and their little girl were away on vacation or something. The back of the Willetts' was dark, so I was seeing how close I could get their house. Even at night I could bring the shingles so close it looked like I could touch them, and Danny Boy's broomstick lying in the backyard had a thin red stripe around the end where the broom had been.

The whole place looked rundown. The backyard had all gone to weeds and dirt. The house was old and hadn't had a coat of paint in years. The second-story porch ran all along the back with a door into the upstairs hallway and at one end there was the steep flight of outside steps.

While I focused on the house the kitchen light went on and Jack Willett walked over to the sink. He got a drink of water and I zoomed in on him with my scope. He was short, with a pot belly and dark greasy-looking hair combed straight back. I could see him so plain I saw a mole just under his right ear. Then Kate came in and he turned around. She had the same torn blouse on and her hair still wasn't combed.

She started by him, shaking her head when he said something, and he grabbed her arm. He said something else, then reached out and slapped her face. I heard the smack clear up where I was, but Kate didn't cry or say anything—she just pulled her arm free and walked away. In a minute a light went on upstairs in the room where the shades were always closed, and then in another minute it went out. Jack sat down at the kitchen table, poured himself a glass of whiskey and just sat drinking it until I got tired of watching

and climbed down. Grandpa was right. Jack Willett seemed to be one mean man.

The next night she was washing dishes at the sink. Danny Boy was with her—I could see the top of his head. Jack came in, not very steady. I'd seen him drinking in the back yard that afternoon. This time she answered back when he said something, and the next thing I knew he drew back his fist and socked her in the face. She didn't make a sound but Danny Boy jumped up, barking. Jack threw a kick at him and left the kitchen, and Kate just went on washing dishes like it hadn't happened. It made me feel a little sick.

The next day Jack was gone again. Kate didn't come outside for several days. Danny Boy played by himself in the back yard. Nights I'd watch Kate sitting at the kitchen table. She drank whiskey, too, and there was a big purple bruise on the side of her face where he'd hit her.

It went on like that through the summer. On nights when Jack was home he'd abuse her and if she talked back she got a punch or a slap. On nights when there was just her and Danny Boy, she sat at the kitchen table and drank or looked off into space. Sometimes she cried.

I don't know why I kept watching. It made me feel bad all the time. I'd never seen grownups act that way and I couldn't understand. I hated Jack Willett; I even hated Kate for letting him do it. I didn't want to know about it, yet I couldn't wait to get up on the roof each night. It never occurred to me I shouldn't be watching—I'd forgotten all about stargazing in favor of the drama going on across the back fence. I thought about telling someone, Jerry or my grandparents, but then my roof place wouldn't be secret and I couldn't go up there any more. So I just kept watching and feeling worse all the time.

July was hot that year, especially at night—hot and sticky, almost impossible to sleep. One night I'd seen the Willetts leave in their car right after supper, and I was half asleep when they came home. I heard him talking to her as the car doors shut and they were climbing the porch stairs to the house. I couldn't make out the words, but he sounded drunk and mean. By the time I got up between the attic windows Kate was in the kitchen, but Jack came back down to the yard. He called Danny Boy, low and gentle. I plastered myself against the shingles. I didn't think he could see me through the maple leaves, but I sure wasn't taking any chances.

He chained Danny to the clothesline. I'd never seen Danny tied before, and he didn't like it. He ran up and down as far as he could go, whining deep in his throat. Jack went back up to the kitchen and right away started picking at Kate again. She had her back to him, but she said something, and he jerked her around and pushed her against the sink. The back of his neck was red. I had the telescope so close I could see the mole on his neck and Kate's big eyes over his shoulder.

He said something, then she did—then he had his hands around her throat and was squeezing it, shaking her back and forth. Her eyes got bigger and her hands came up to stop him, but he just kept squeezing. I could see her choking. She clawed at his face but he wouldn't let go and her face started turning color.

Outside, Danny Boy began to bark, lunging back and forth on the clothesline, and inside her husband just kept squeezing Kate Willett's neck. It seemed to go on forever. Kate's face turned dark red and her mouth hung open. Finally I saw her eyes roll up and she went limp, just kind of collapsing, dangling from Jack's hands.

He dropped her then and stepped back. She fell on the floor and I was glad I couldn't see her any more. Jack stared at her like he didn't realize what had happened, then he spun around and looked straight out the window. I thought my heart would stop. Danny Boy was whining and throwing himself against his chain. I heard a whimpering sound and it took several seconds to realize it was me.

For a few minutes Jack Willett stood at the window staring out, then he ran out to the back porch and told Danny Boy to be still. Danny hunkered down, watching him. Jack looked around at all the houses, and for the first time I wondered why no one had heard the commotion. Then I remembered Jerry's family was away on vacation and the Peters and their little girl had gone out somewhere. Thunder couldn't rouse my grandparents on the front side of the house. Nobody knew but me. I was so scared I thought I was going to pass out.

Jack came down the steps toward Danny. The dog backed up, making deep sounds, not taking his eyes off Jack, but Jack spoke to him soft until he got close enough to unhook the chain. Danny Boy just stood there, then Jack kicked at him. He was so drunk he missed and almost fell, but Danny jumped away and Jack snarled at him, "Go on, git! Get out of here! Git!" He picked up a dirt clod and threw it, and without a sound Danny turned and ran, disappearing around the side of the house.

After another long look around, Jack went back inside. For almost two hours he sat at the kitchen table drinking whiskey, and he never once looked down at the floor behind him. Too scared to move, I tried to convince myself Kate had just fainted, that she'd come to after a while and get up and give him a good whack over the head.

It was just about two o'clock by my watch when Jack got up and came down to the yard with a shovel and started to dig in the thick honeysuckle that had come down off the fence and taken over half the yard. I watched from the roof, sick and dizzy, listening to him grunting and panting and the shovel going chunk chunk chunk. I could see his back plain through the leaves and was afraid that if he looked up he might see me, but the only thing he seemed interested in was the hole he was digging.

Finally he went back inside and turned off all the lights—then he came out carrying Kate. It took him a long time to get her downstairs in the dark and put her in the hole. He started shoveling the dirt back in, spread it even over the top, and pulled the honeysuckle over the top. It was a good job—nobody'd know there was anything underneath.

A long time after he went back inside and everything was quiet again, I half climbed, half fell back into my window and rolled up in a ball on the bed. I was covered with sweat, but I was freezing and I lay awake all night, wanting to go to sleep so I'd wake up and find it was all a bad dream. But I was still wide-eyed when the sun came up, so I knew it really had happened and I didn't know what to do.

I told Grandma I was sick and stayed in my room all day, half the time staring out the window, the rest of the time keeping as far away from it as I could. Grandma plied me with hot tea and soup and I wanted to tell her about it, but I was so scared of Jack Willett and afraid I'd get in trouble I couldn't get it out of my mouth.

By the next day it was all over town that Kate Willett had run away and left Jack. He told it himself, but he didn't get much sympathy. Most people let him know it was just what he deserved.

"The man's no good," Grandpa said firmly. "Meanest man I ever hope to know."

"I'm surprised she didn't go sooner," Grandma said, and I sat with a mouthful of mashed potatoes that tasted like paste.

Jack Willett went out of town again, Jerry came back from vacation, and there were times when I almost forgot what I'd seen—in

the daylight, that is. At night I turned my face to the wall, away from the window and the honeysuckle in the Willetts' back yard. I thought about calling my parents and asking to go home, but my mother was just home from the hospital and I knew she needed the time to be quiet and concentrate on getting well.

Then Jack Willett came home. And Danny Boy did, too. Jack's car drove into his side yard one afternoon while I was mowing the back yard. I looked across the fence and he was facing me, but he didn't say anything. I dropped the mower handle like it was hot and headed for the house. Grandma said I didn't have to finish, that I'd probably gotten too much sun, and she put me on the front porch swing with a glass of lemonade.

I didn't even look at the house that night, and was almost asleep when I heard the whining. It wasn't loud, not enough to disturb the neighbors, just enough for Jack and me to hear. It raised the hairs on the back of my neck.

I sneaked to the window. The Willett house was dark. Then a light went on upstairs in the hallway. It shone into the backyard and I saw Danny Boy. He was in the honeysuckle looking toward the house, sitting right on top of Kate Willett's grave.

Jack came out onto the upstairs porch—he came slowly, like he really didn't want to. When he saw Danny Boy he made a funny sound, then he said, "What're you doing here? Didn't I tell you to git? Go on—git!" Danny Boy just looked back at him for a minute, then got up and trotted around the corner of the house. Jack didn't go back inside for a while—he stood at the porch rail looking down at the honeysuckle bed.

The next night it happened again, and this time Jack came tearing down the stairs and into the yard, but Danny was too quick for him—by the time Jack reached the bottom step Danny was gone.

When Jack was away, Danny didn't appear—days would go by with no sign of him—but as soon as Jack was home he was back, coming each night to sit in the honeysuckle and whine until Jack came out to drive him away. Only once did I see him in the daytime. Grandma was with me out in back when he trotted across the Willetts' yard. Grandma said, "Oh, look at the poor thing, he's so thin and dirty. See if he'll come to you, Richard—we'll give him something to eat."

But he wouldn't come, and though Grandma started putting food out for him every night it went untouched.

Jack Willett was drinking harder. He was drunk most of the time

he was home, and on several occasions the neighbors heard crashing sounds inside the house and Jack's voice shouting words we couldn't understand.

The first night I went back up on the roof, Jack had been drunk all day. He'd even fallen down in the back yard and Jerry's dad called over to tell him he'd better shape up before the neighbors swore out a complaint. But Jack had just yelled at him and staggered back inside. The house was dark when I went out my window and started up the maple tree—there was supposed to be a meteor shower I just had to see.

A few minutes after I got settled, I saw Danny Boy in the moonlight, trotting up Jack Willett's driveway and into the back yard. I got a crawly feeling down my back—I didn't want to be up on the roof when he started whining and Jack came out after him.

But he didn't go to the honeysuckle bed. He stopped in the yard for a minute, looking at the house, then went over and bellied under the back porch. When he came out he had something in his mouth. Under the moonlight I saw it was the broomstick, his favorite toy.

Holding it in his jaws, he crossed to the outside steps and started up to the second-story porch. It was awkward going—a couple of times the stick clipped the railing and almost fell, but Danny caught it and kept climbing, glancing up frequently to see how far he had to go. When he reached the top step, he bent his head and released the broom handle, lining it up with the edge of the step the way I'd seen him do that day on the porch with Kate.

Then, stepping nimbly over it, he padded across the porch until he was under Jack's bedroom window and sat down on his haunches under it. I knew what he was going to do just as surely as if I'd planned it myself, but when he raised his muzzle and started that low eerie whine I broke out in cold sweat all over.

It took a few minutes before it roused Jack, but finally the bedroom light went on and seconds later the porch door burst open and he came out. Danny edged backward with a low growl.

The next few seconds went by so fast I didn't have time to breathe. Jack grabbed for Danny Boy and Danny backed away, just out of reach. Jack lunged again and again Danny danced away. The next time Jack leaped, Danny turned and ran for the steps, Jack pounding right behind. I watched and didn't believe what I was seeing. At the top of the stairs Danny suddenly sidestepped, pressing against the side of the house.

Jack didn't have a chance. If he'd been sober maybe he could've stopped himself, but he wasn't. His foot hit the broomstick on the top step and it rolled. He made a futile try for the railing but he and the stick went down together. The sound his head made when he landed on the concrete walk below was the worst sound I ever heard.

Danny Boy stood looking down at him for a time. Then he padded to the open door, clamped the knob firmly in his teeth, and closed it. He went down the steps, skirting Jack lying at the bottom, and disappeared around the corner of the house, leaving me on the roof with a story no one would ever believe.

A few days later when I went home, the town was still vocal with the good riddance of Jack Willett and his mean and drunken ways.

Over the next year memories would fade, then come alive again with each bit of news from Brownwood. Shortly after I left, Danny Boy showed up to accept Grandma's food offerings and decided to stay. He's still there, and Grandma swears he's the best watchdog in town.

The people who owned the house the Willetts had lived in decided to sell it rather than try to rent it out again and the new owners tore it down to build a modern one. When they were digging the new foundation they found Kate Willett's body.

My whole family went back to Brownwood the next summer, and first chance I got I went looking for Danny. He was lying in the shade of my maple tree.

He raised his head and thumped a lazy tail when I crouched down beside him. "Danny?" I said. "Danny Boy, remember me? Listen, I know what you did. I saw it, Danny. You did okay. Good dog—you're a good, good dog."

He looked full at me, wagging his tail—tongue lolling, his mouth opened wide, stretching till all his gums and white teeth showed.

I would swear he was grinning.

"Q"

a **NEW** short story by

PATRICIA MOYES

There is a sort of snobbery which masquerades under the term "trendy." Both Mr. Sloane and Mr. Pettigrew liked to think of themselves as trendy . . .

THE SMALL TRAIN ROBBERY

by **PATRICIA MOYES**

There are far fewer coincidences in life than most people imagine. A visitor from the country, gazing at the apparently random throngs of Londoners or New Yorkers milling around the city, would detect no pattern whatsoever. But a native of any big city—let us envisage him as watching the same crowded section of the metropolis from his high window each day—would soon begin to recognize familiar faces. Workers from the suburbs, arriving by the same train every morning and lining up for the same bus to the same destination. Policemen on regular street patrol. Housewives shopping at the same supermarket on the same day each week. The list is endless. It is the random faces which are in the minority.

Apart from this aspect of patterned travel and movement, there is a similarity in the general lifestyle of people in the same income bracket, living in the same sort of houses, taking the same sort of vacations, buying the same sort of goods. This is why there was really no great coincidence in the case of the Sloanes and the Pettigrews, even though there appeared to be on the surface.

The Sloanes and the Pettigrews lived in similar houses, in similar suburbs, but on different sides of London—one family to the south and the other to the west. These are the directions preferred by the more affluent suburbanites. Mr. Sloane and Mr. Pettigrew both held good jobs in London, and our mythical viewers (we would need two)

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would have seen them arriving daily at the same hour, but at different railway stations—Mr. Sloane, from the south, at Victoria; Mr. Pettigrew, from the west, at Waterloo.

Mrs. Sloane and Mrs. Pettigrew shopped at different supermarkets, of course, but both of the same prestigious name, noted for quality. Both also patronized small, privately run shops for speciality foods. Both bought their basic clothes at the best of the big chain stores but splurged on an occasional outfit from a local boutique or a large London shop.

Both families had two children—an elder boy and a younger girl. Brian Sloane and Christopher Pettigrew were ten years old. Susan Sloane was six and Amanda Pettigrew five—we must allow a certain amount of individuality. Otherwise, the two families were so identical that there was nothing at all strange in the fact that a week before Christmas both couples should have been in the toy department of a famous London store on Saturday morning choosing Christmas presents for their children. It was not a shop that either family patronized a great deal, being far too expensive—but Christmas is Christmas and one feels one owes it to the kids. Besides, their school friends would probably look down on them if they couldn't produce the cachet of a famous London label.

There is a special attraction about toy trains. Computerized games and spaceships and flying saucers are all very well, but there is nothing quite like the Christmastime show of engines and coaches rushing around that enormous display table, hooting as they charge into the tunnels, being diverted onto side tracks by electrically worked signals, pulling up at tiny stations to be boarded by midget plastic passengers. Mrs. Sloane and Mrs. Pettigrew—who did not meet on this occasion—were immersed in seas of dolls and miniature cookery sets for their daughters (who says that sex discrimination does not begin in the nursery?) but their husbands found themselves standing side by side, utterly enthralled by the magic of the toy-train display.

Now, there is a sort of snobbery which masquerades under the term "trendy." This means that to keep ahead of your inferiors and in step with your peers you abandon any fad as soon as it becomes popular and look for something entirely different. Both Mr. Sloane and Mr. Pettigrew liked to think of themselves as trendy—the bright new young successful generation. Both had noticed that when it came to toys the spaceship-computer was reaching peak popularity,

while trendy people had switched to more old-fashioned items—replicas of Victorian china dolls and dolls' houses, painted hobbyhorses, do-it-yourself kits for building models of *The Spirit of St. Louis*, and so forth.

As they stood watching the miniature railway, Mr. Pettigrew remarked to Mr. Sloane, "Fascinating, isn't it? I don't believe any man really grows out of his love of trains."

Mr. Sloane agreed. "I'm thinking of buying one of these for my boy," he said. "He's just turned ten."

Mr. Pettigrew was one up. "Oh, really? I always feel the electric sets are rather ordinary—unless you can afford the whole display *and* have space for it at home." There was a pause. "My boy is ten too. I've decided to get him one of those old-fashioned steam engines over there."

"Steam engines?" said Mr. Sloane jealously. "I haven't seen any steam engines."

"Over here. Come and take a look." Mr. Pettigrew tried not to sound smug. "By the way," he added, as the two men made their way to the other side of the crowded department, "My name's Pettigrew. Charles Pettigrew."

"Harold Sloane," replied Mr. Sloane. "Nice to meet you." The two shook hands briefly.

"Well," said Mr. Pettigrew. "There she is."

"Remarkable," said Mr. Sloane. "Works on batteries, I suppose."

"That's right. She'll run on rails, of course, but also just on the floor. I feel sure Christopher will love it."

Round and round on a small circular track the toy engine chugged doggedly to nowhere. It was indeed ingenious. An interior light simulated the roaring furnace, which was continuously being stoked by a miniature stoker—a mannequin of real metal, like an old-fashioned toy soldier. No plastic here.

The tender behind the engine was filled with small lumps of black-painted metal which looked remarkably like coal, even if they were a bit too shiny, and by a clockwork mechanism the stoker would turn every few minutes, bury his shovel in the coal, and swing back to the fire again. The shovel was empty, of course, but the effect was still impressive. Even more so was the effect of puffs of smoke which emerged from time to time from the engine's funnel. The driver wore the uniform of the old Great Western Railway.

A small remote-control panel, rather like those used to change television channels from the comfort of one's armchair, enabled the

user to speed up, slow down, or stop the engine, to blow the whistle, and to produce the smoke puffs. This was without doubt the train for those who were catching the trend towards the past.

Mr. Sloane said, "I hope you won't think I'm being a copycat if I get one for Brian too."

Mr. Pettigrew laughed. "Of course not," he said, conscious of his superiority. "In any case, the boys are unlikely to meet—unless by any chance you are taking a skiing holiday in Switzerland after Christmas."

"Now, that really is a coincidence!" exclaimed Mr. Sloane. "As a matter of fact, we are. January fifth to fifteenth, at Verbier."

"How very extraordinary," remarked Mr. Pettigrew. "We shall be at the same place on the same dates. Which hotel?"

"La Poste."

"Even the same hotel! Well, well—what a small place the world is, to be sure."

Once again the element of coincidence was smaller than might appear. Skiing was definitely "in," and everybody knew that France and Austria were cheaper than Switzerland and therefore carried less prestige. January, once the Christmas festivities are over, is less expensive than the high season of February and March. The Hotel de la Poste at Verbier—an excellent and charming small hotel—is not the Palace at St. Moritz. Once again, snobbery and expediency had brought the Sloanes and the Pettigrews to the same conclusion, this time as to type of holiday, country, dates, resort, and hotel.

The two men purchased their identical trains, shook hands with much more warmth than before, and looked forward to meeting each other again.

This happened at London Airport on January fifth, where the two families waited to board the same aircraft bound for Geneva.

This time the wives were introduced, and then the children. Each wife carried an airline bag as hand-luggage, and each bag contained, among other essentials for the journey, an identical toy steam engine. Both boys had refused to be parted from their favorite Christmas present while on holiday.

Brian Sloane and Christopher Pettigrew eyed each other warily, like young animals. However, the discovery that each owned an identical engine began to break the ice.

"I bet mine goes faster than yours," said Christopher.

"Bet it doesn't," retorted Brian.

"Let's have a race then. Mummy, can I have my engine?"

"Yes, please, Mummy," echoed Brian to *his* mother. "We want to try them."

"No, you may not," said both mothers in unison. "You can play with them at the hotel when we get there."

As it turned out, skiing was more popular with the parents and the small girls than it was with the boys. Susan and Amanda joined the children's class and learned quickly if unscientifically, as small children almost always do. The boys—too young for the adult classes—found it humiliating to be outdone by their younger sisters and soon took to cutting ski lessons in order to play with their trains. This they did mostly in the corridors and lobbies of the hotel—looked on indulgently by a kindly staff, for such places were mostly deserted in the daytime.

Soon the game became fiercely competitive. It turned out that a considerable amount of skill entered into the manipulation of the remote controls and so a number of ingenious variations on the simple speed race were evolved, such as halting one's engine at an exact mark, or covering a certain amount of floor space in a certain number of seconds—moving slowly at a calculated speed—and so on.

The two families became extremely friendly. They shared a table in the dining room, and talked about skiing and snow conditions. By tacit consent, neither Mr. Sloane nor Mr. Pettigrew talked about their work. It was understood that both were "something in the City," and left it at that. One day, however, Mr. Pettigrew announced that he had to go down to Geneva on business. ("My excuse for taking this holiday, old man, if the truth were told," he remarked to Mr. Sloane, with a wink.)

Business in Geneva put Mr. Pettigrew in an undoubtedly one-up position, until Mr. Sloane countered neatly by an even more dramatic day away from the resort—a trip by express train through the Simplon Tunnel into Italy and to Milan, where he had a colleague with whom he "wanted to consult." Mr. Pettigrew was reasonably sure that no such colleague existed, but he had no way of proving it. He comforted himself with the thought that Mr. Sloane had missed a superb day's skiing and spent a lot of money just to make himself look important. As if it mattered.

All too soon the holiday ended and the families returned to Geneva to catch their plane back to London—only to find chaos at the airport.

As frequently happens in winter, while the mountain resorts bask in sunshine under blue skies, a *mer de brouillard*, or sea of fog, settles in the valleys. The airport, under the joint pressures of fog and a new snowfall, was closed down. Would-be passengers milled and grumbled as flight after flight was announced as indefinitely postponed. Children became bored and tetchy. Adults tended to patronize the bars in order to pass the time. An airport is an attractive place to pass through, but it can become extremely tedious if one is stuck there for four or five hours.

But at last the authorities took a decision. The airport at Zurich was open, and passengers for London would be taken there by train in order to board a specially arranged flight to Heathrow. Anything was better than sitting around Cointrin Airport in the fog—but the train journey to Zurich takes some five hours and was not much fun either. As soon as the Sloanes and the Pettigrews were installed in their compartment and the train pulled out of the station, Brian and Christopher demanded their toy engines. The corridor of a real train was, to them, an ideal place for their games.

The parents sighed, but—all right, let them have them, anything to keep them amused. It was only when other passengers complained that the guard finally came to tell the Sloanes and the Pettigrews that it must stop. Both boys, thoroughly tired and fretful, set up howls of protest and the two weary fathers were sent to take the trains from them and repack them while the mothers tried to console the boys with candy.

Everybody was delighted when Zurich was reached at last, and an airport bus took the exhausted travellers to the airport. Oh, the relief to be actually on board, taxiing, taking off. Another drink, a snack, and in a few minutes just about the whole aircraft was asleep. It was, after all, seven o'clock in the evening and most of the travelers coming from mountain resorts, like the Sloanes and the Pettigrews, had left their hotels before seven that morning.

At last, London Airport. The long, arm-breaking walk with heavy hand-luggage (the flat rolling platforms out of order, as usual), the endless wait for baggage, but it was home, sweet home.

The Pettigrews and the Sloanes, having finally claimed their luggage, set out together for the "Nothing to Declare" Customs exit, like hundreds of other returning holiday-makers with just the one permitted bottle of whiskey and carton of cigarettes. At the checkout, a few bored-looking Customs Officers sat making an occasional spot

check. They were well trained. They knew how to distinguish between the genuine returning tourist and the professional smuggler. It was just as the two families were passing this vital point that Brian Sloane raised his voice in a wail of protest.

"He's stolen my train!"

Everybody stopped and the Customs Officers looked up, jerked out of their boredom, amused.

"I haven't! I haven't touched your horrid old train!" cried Christopher.

"He has! He has! This isn't mine!"

Brian had been allowed to take his toy train out of the airline bag to amuse him during the long wait for baggage. He was now waving it in the air and shouting, "He stole it! He stole it because mine's better!"

"Now, now, what's all the fuss about?" asked a kind-faced lady Customs Officer, coming out from behind her desk.

"Nothing, nothing," said Mr. Pettigrew, quickly. "Our sons have identical toy trains and they've been playing with them a lot on holiday. As you may know, we've had a long hard day, and they're both a little fractious. Alice, dear," he added to his wife, "do take Christopher's train out of your bag. There. Exactly the same. You see, Brian? Nobody has stolen anybody's train. You have one each, exactly alike, as you've always had."

Brian Sloane's young mouth set in a hard line. "That's my train," he said, pointing to the one Christopher was now clutching to his chest. "This one isn't mine. It's different."

"Brian dear," said Mrs. Sloane, "it isn't different. You're just imagining things because you're tired."

"I'm not! I'm not!" Brian appealed to the nice lady Customs Officer. "Come and look! They're different!"

The lady smiled a conspiratorial smile at all four parents. She said, "Come and show me then, both of you. I can't see any difference."

"Look at the coal!" Brian shouted. "Christopher's has been like that ever since his daddy went to Geneva! And now it's on my train!"

There was a sudden silence. The lady Customs Officer examined the coal on both trains more closely. Then she straightened up and went to call a male colleague.

Quite suddenly, there seemed to be a lot of people around.

A man in uniform, who seemed to have some authority, said to

Mr. Pettigrew, "Just a routine question, sir—may I ask where you work?"

Another moment of silence. Then Mr. Pettigrew said, "If you must know, I work in Hatton Garden."

"The diamond market?"

"Yes."

Slowly the man said, "Young Brian here has bright eyes. He is perfectly correct in saying that the trains are different. These pieces of so-called coal—" he indicated Brian's train "—are in fact uncut diamonds, painted black. It's been cleverly done, but there's no doubt about it."

Mrs. Sloane had gone very pale. She said, "I assure you, I had no idea—"

"No, madam," said the man in authority, "I'm sure you didn't. The trains were switched at the last moment so that your son—or, in fact, you—would be smuggling the diamonds into Britain, if anybody was bright enough to notice. Once through Customs, the engines would have been switched back to their real owners."

Alice Pettigrew began to shout. "I don't think it's fair to accuse us like that! Somebody put the boy up to it! How could he ever have noticed?"

Brian Sloane said defiantly, "Because I've been taught to observe, that's why!"

"And who taught you?" Mr. Pettigrew sounded casual, almost amused.

"My dad, of course! I told him about the difference in Christopher's train the day after you got back from Geneva. Didn't you know my dad's a Detective Superintendent at Scotland Yard?"

"Oh, dear," said Mr. Pettigrew. "Just my luck. And the colleague in Milan?"

"Interpol," said Mr. Sloane shortly. "You wouldn't have got away with it—but I didn't expect it to happen like this. I told Brian to keep his mouth shut. I didn't realize you'd switched the train. Did you do that on the train to Zurich?"

"No," said Mr. Pettigrew. "On the aircraft. You were all asleep." He held out his hand to Mr. Sloane. "It's been nice knowing you," he said. "We are, after all, very much alike."

"Good at our jobs," said Mr. Sloane with a smile.

"Trendy," said Mr. Pettigrew.

THE KING OF CHICAGO

by **AUBREY DAVIDSON**

On a corner by the crossing, outside Tony's cold-meat store,
There are bloodstains in the gutter and bloodstains by the door,
And Tony's on the sidewalk with a cleaver in his head:
His wife can't recognize him and he's very very dead.

He's lying on the sidewalk
And he's lying there alone—
He should have paid protection
As advised by Al Capone.

There's a figure slumped across the chair in Harry's barbershop
And the plate-glass window's busted and they're shouting for a cop,
For Harry's just been shaven and the lather's running red:
There's a razor in his windpipe and he's very very dead.

They say that cutthroat razor
Went so deep it touched the bone—
He should have paid protection
As advised by Al Capone.

Now Murphy owned a liquor store beyond the edge of town—
His joint was raided late last night and all the staff gunned down—
And Murphy's in a whiskey vat, face downward so thêy said:
His eyes are still wide open but he's very very dead.

I'm told that Murphy's body
Was weighted with a stone—
He should have paid protection
As advised by Al Capone.

I've an undertaker's parlor, but today I've taken fright,
The display inside my window has been altered in the night.
For laid inside a coffin that was fully lined with lead
Was a waxwork undertaker, looking very very dead.

I'm no Chicago hero,
I just seized the telephone—
And said I'd pay protection
As advised by Al Capone.

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a **NEW Nick Velvet story by**

EDWARD D. HOCH

While on vacation in Florida with Gloria, Nick Velvet is asked to steal a used teabag—for his usual fee of twenty-five thousand dollars. And Nick, unsurprisingly, rises to the bait, in spite of the mysterious circumstances. Mysterious circumstances are nothing new to Nick Velvet. But a used teabag? For twenty-five thousand dollars? Where a Nick Velvet assignment is concerned, surprises never cease . . .

THE THEFT OF THE USED TEABAG

by **EDWARD D. HOCH**

It was Gloria who brought him the assignment, on one of their infrequent Florida vacations. "She told me she knew I lived with Nick Velvet and she wants to hire you. For your usual fee, no special favors."

Nick roused himself from the sand and turned over. He'd been getting too much sun anyway. "Tell me again who this woman is."

"Her name is Mildred Fargo—I went to high school with her. I haven't seen her in twenty years, but we've kept in touch and as long as I was down here for the week I phoned her and suggested we have lunch. Anyway, she knows about you and she needs to have something stolen. She'll pay you twenty-five thousand dollars."

"I'm supposed to be on vacation," Nick complained. "We tried to get away on the boat for a few days and got involved in that soap

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business. Now we come to Florida and you involve me in something else!"

"She's an old friend, Nicky."

He sighed and stared up at the cloudless sky. "What does she want stolen?"

"A used teabag," Gloria answered distastefully. "It sounds right up your alley."

Nick thought about that. Finally he said, "Well, it's something different anyway. I guess I'd like to meet a woman who wants me to steal a used teabag."

"I knew you would. She's invited us for dinner tonight. You'll like Mildred, I promise."

"What does she do for a living?"

"She was married to a bartender a long time ago. I may be wrong, but I have a feeling that now she smuggles dope."

Dinner with Mildred Fargo was to be at the Landsmen's Club overlooking Biscayne Bay. Gloria and Nick arrived early at the private club and he passed the time while they waited reading the notices on the members' bulletin board. There was the telephone number of the Birdwatchers' Hotline and a notice of typing services available to members, along with the traditional listing of members in arrears on their dues. He decided it was not a club for him.

"Here they are," Gloria said. This was the first he'd heard of "they," and he turned to see a tall slim man with a gray mustache and thinning gray hair, accompanied by a strikingly beautiful woman whose long blonde hair swept over the shoulders of her clinging black dress. If she'd gone to high school with Gloria, Nick knew she had to be nearly forty, but she might easily have passed for ten years younger.

"You must be Nick Velvet." She held out a delicate hand. "I've heard so much about you from Gloria."

"All good, I hope," Nick murmured.

She smiled and turned to her partner. "This is Seymour Bentley, a good friend of mine. Seymour, Nick Velvet and Gloria." They shook hands all around and Mildred added, "Seymour is a member here. The dues are too rich for my blood."

"Landsmen was an all-male club until last year," Bentley explained, leading them into the dining room. "We still have very few women members—mainly widows of deceased members."

Their table was by the window, overlooking the bay. In the early

evening light they could see a regatta of yachts under way, their tall sails forming an irregular line across the water. "Do you sail?" Mildred Fargo asked Nick.

"Gloria and I manage to get out a few times each summer."

"We were up to Cape Cod last month," Gloria added.

"I could go for that myself," Bentley said. "Not as much as Millie, though. She's forever racing high-speed motorboats between here and the Bahamas."

"Really?" Nick said. "I'd think that would be a bit dangerous. We're getting into the hurricane season, to say nothing of the drug smugglers. From what I read that's getting to be a real problem." Gloria nudged him under the table with her foot, but Mildred Fargo didn't change her expression.

"The Coast Guard looks after us," she said simply and opened the menu.

Dinner was elegant and expensive, but Seymour Bentley waved away Nick's offer of money as dessert was being served. "You're my guests." He had ordered tea while the others had coffee—and Nick began to understand why Mildred Fargo had arranged for them to have dinner with him.

As they lingered over after-dinner drinks and Bentley excused himself, Gloria said, "Tell him about it now, Mildred."

Millie turned and smiled at Nick. "As you see, Seymour takes tea after dinner. He dines here almost every evening when he's in town. I want you to steal the used teabag from his plate tomorrow."

"I see."

"Gloria tells me that would be no problem for you."

"No problem at all, but I'm sure you could bribe a waiter to do the same thing for five dollars. Why pay me twenty-five thousand?"

"This is a private club, Mr. Velvet, and the employees are quite loyal to the membership. I could never do what you suggest, and I warn you in advance that your efforts in that direction would not only meet with failure but would warn Seymour to be on his guard."

Nick saw Bentley returning from across the room. "All right," he said quickly. "Tomorrow night."

"Are we about ready to go?" Seymour Bentley asked as he returned. "I have something I'd like to show you all."

Nick and Gloria left their car in the club parking lot and went with Bentley in his long white Continental. Nick sat behind Mildred

Fargo during the short ride. Gloria had been right about his liking her. However she earned her money, she was a very pretty lady.

"Here it is," Bentley announced, turning off into a parking spot by the water's edge. They were at a small private marina, one of several that dotted the shoreline along this stretch of Biscayne Bay.

"You've got a new boat!" Mildred exclaimed. She ran from the car along the pier to the sleek cabin cruiser Bentley had indicated. "Oh, Seymour—it's beautiful! When can I go out on it?"

"Whenever you want. How about tomorrow?"

Her face fell. "You know I'm off to the Bahamas tomorrow. How about next Monday?"

He smiled at her disappointment. "Monday it is. I'll phone you over the weekend."

"Can we go aboard now?" she asked.

"No—" He glanced apologetically at Nick and Gloria. "I'd show you around, but my time's a bit short. Maybe some other time."

"We'll be going back home this weekend," Nick said. "But I can see she's a beauty. I wish you luck with her."

"Thank you, sir."

Seymour drove them back to the club parking lot, where he and Mildred parted with a friendly kiss. When it developed she'd be taking a taxi home Nick offered her a ride, realizing this was probably what she'd planned.

Settling into the back seat of his rented car she asked, "Well, what did you think of him?"

"Handsome," Nick said. "Personable. I imagine he's a good yachtsman."

"Are you deeply involved with him?" Gloria asked.

"Not really," Millie said. "Why do you ask?"

"Because by hiring Nick you're obviously double-crossing him in some manner. Or setting him up for something."

"By hiring Nick I'm protecting myself, that's all."

"What does he use that boat for?" Nick asked her, though he suspected he knew the answer.

"It's better if you don't know too much," she replied. "All I want is that teabag tomorrow, after he uses it."

"Will he be dining alone?"

"I have no way of knowing, though I suspect not. No doubt he'll be with some business associate, or even another woman."

"That doesn't bother you? Do you want a report on it?"

She shook her head. "No, all I want is the teabag. I'll give you your money when you deliver it. In cash, of course."

"You'll be in the Bahamas tomorrow?" Nick asked.

"I'm flying over to pick up a boat a friend borrowed. I'll be bringing it back sometime during the night."

Nick and Gloria exchanged glances. "I see," Nick said. "Then I should deliver the teabag to you on Friday. Where should we meet?"

She jotted some numbers on a slip of paper from her notebook. "Call me at this number Friday morning—any time after nine. I should be back by then."

As they pulled up in front of the gleaming white condominium where Mildred lived, Gloria ventured a suggestion to her old friend. "Be careful, Mildred. Don't get in too deep."

Millie squeezed Gloria's hand and slipped out of the car without a reply.

The following morning over breakfast on the patio of their hotel, Gloria asked Nick, "Why do you think she wants it stolen?"

He shrugged. "Someone is gradually poisoning Bentley with the nightly teabags and she wants proof of it. Or someone is smuggling uncut diamonds to him in the bags and she wants to intercept them. It could be anything. I'll probably know when I get the bag."

"Nothing ever surprises you, does it, Nicky?"

"Not much," he admitted. "Losing a fee once in a while—that's always a surprise." He'd been thinking about Mildred Fargo, as he did about each new client, weighing her motives, speculating about her ability and willingness to pay on delivery. "You said you thought she was smuggling dope. How come?"

Gloria toyed with her coffee cup. "I don't know. Maybe it's just the way she dresses and acts. And that's a beautiful condo she's got. The papers are full of stories about the South Florida drug traffic. She must get her money from somewhere, and that seems likely to me."

"Perhaps she has a wealthy lover."

"She wouldn't be fooling around with Seymour Bentley if she did. And he's certainly not supporting her. He wouldn't even trust her on his new boat last night."

Nick nodded. "They seemed more like friendly rivals than lovers, and her hiring me to steal the teabag strengthens that feeling."

"How are you going to do it?" she asked.

He smiled at her. "By misdirection," he said . . .

That evening, as the parking lot at the Landsmen's Club began to fill up, Nick parked his rented car in the special employees' area and walked quickly to the back door. He entered through a locker room adjoining the kitchen and immediately encountered a bearded man in white who seemed to be one of the cooks. "I'm the new waiter," Nick said.

The bearded man scowled at him. "New waiter? Who hired you?"

"The manager, Mr.—"

"Jennings?" the cook supplied helpfully. "I guess he's still around. You know where his office is?"

Nick nodded and went out through the swinging doors to the dining room, careful to keep his face turned away from the table Seymour Bentley had occupied the night before. But when he did steal a look he saw the table was empty. Had all his plans been for nothing?

He lingered a few minutes at the bulletin board, rereading the same notices he'd seen the previous evening. Finally he strolled over to the registration desk by the door. "Could you tell me if Mr. Bentley has reserved a table for this evening?" he asked the young woman on duty.

As he spoke, a middle-aged man with dark curly hair entered through the outside door. He heard Nick's question and paused on the steps.

"I'm Graham Jennings, the manager," he said. "What's your business with Mr. Bentley?"

The question took Nick off guard. "I was supposed to meet him here for dinner."

Jennings let out his breath in a sort of sigh. "Then I have some bad news for you. Seymour Bentley's new boat caught fire at sea and sank a few hours ago. We're afraid he might have gone down with it."

Nick telephoned Mildred Fargo promptly at nine the following morning. "I suppose you've seen the newspapers," he said.

"Yes. Can you come over?"

"I'm on my way."

As he prepared to leave, Gloria asked if she should come along.

"Maybe I'd better go alone," Nick told her. "I can't imagine what she wants now, but I can see we're out twenty-five grand. I can't steal a used teabag from a dead man."

"Have they recovered the body?"

"According to the papers, no. But the boat was seen to be on fire and they found pieces of the superstructure floating in the water. A Coast Guard vessel was nearby at the time but no rescues were made."

"Do you think someone killed him, Nicky?"

"I don't know, and whatever happened I don't want to get involved. But I'll see what Millie has to say."

Mildred Fargo had a great deal to say. She met Nick at the door of her condominium and ushered him inside.

"I don't believe he's dead," she announced at once. "It's some sort of trick."

"How could that be?" Nick asked innocently. "The newspaper account says there was a Coast Guard cutter nearby at the time."

"Exactly! That's why it happened—I'm sure of it!" She sat down and fumbled for a cigarette. He could see that she was far more nervous than on their previous meeting. "I think I'm going to have to take you into my confidence, Nick," she said, "I hope I can trust you. Gloria said I could."

Nick smiled. "I think we're both on the same side of the law. That makes for a certain amount of trust."

"Then Gloria knows how I make my living?"

"Only a suspicion. In South Florida, frequent boat trips between the mainland and the Bahamas do suggest drugs."

She nodded. "I suppose it's obvious. I've been into it for three years now, buying marijuana in Jamaica and bringing it into the country, usually in two-thousand-pound lots. We fly it from Kingston to one of the islands in the Bahamas and then bring it the rest of the way in high-speed motorboats, landing in the marshes along the southern part of Biscayne Bay."

"The Coast Guard must know," Nick commented.

"Of course they know. But knowing it and proving it are two different things. I've never been caught with a load yet. My boats are custom-made with hiding places they'd never find in a hundred years."

"And Seymour Bentley?"

"He's in the business. You might call it a friendly rivalry. That's why he took me down to see his new boat the other night."

"He operates the same way you do?"

"Pretty much. We're always one jump ahead of the Coast Guard and they've stopped him a half dozen times without finding a trace of drugs. Once they even sent a skindiver down to examine the hull

of his yacht, but he found nothing. I think I'm good, but Seymour's a magician when it comes to hiding the stuff. If the Coast Guard was approaching to board him yesterday he may have scuttled the boat and escaped somehow."

"Well, at any rate there's no chance to steal the teabag now."

"Maybe there is," Millie said. She leaned forward intently. "Only this time from a man named Marc Watson."

"What makes these teabags so important?" Nick asked.

"You must trust me it's nothing of value, Nick. Gloria told me about your scruples. All I can say is that when I dined with Seymour at Landsmen's he often slipped the used teabag into his handkerchief and pocketed it when he thought I wasn't looking. Once I noticed Marc Watson doing the same thing. I want to know why, that's all."

"You must have some important suspicions. That's a great deal of money just to satisfy your curiosity."

"Of course I have suspicions. I believe some members of the Landsmen's Club are using it as a front for narcotics-smuggling on a massive scale. Despite the name, they're mainly yachtsmen. They make frequent trips between here and the islands. Jennings, the club manager, may have enlisted them in a scheme to get rich quick."

But Nick still had his doubts. "It seems to me that most of the Landsmen members are wealthy enough already. Why should they get involved in something like this and risk arrest?"

"Sometimes people like Seymour aren't as rich as they seem. And many of the Landsmen members gained their wealth through drugs in the first place."

"Surely the police—"

"The police and the Coast Guard are overworked. Every day they have drugs by the ton coming into South Florida by sea and by air. They manage to stop just a small part of it." She rose and walked to a desk across the room and returned with a sheet of paper on which were written the names of Bentley and Watson. Bentley's name was followed by a half dozen recent dates, Watson's by just one.

"You're really serious about this," Nick commented.

"Of course I'm serious—and I hope that for twenty-five thousand you are too. Look at these dates. Each of them indicates a lunch or a dinner at which I observed either Seymour Bentley or Marc Watson putting a used teabag into his pocket. And on each occasion the man took his boat out the following day. I checked."

"It's still summer," Nick pointed out. "I'd expect people are out

with their boats every day if they can spare the time. I know I would be if I lived here."

"No, these were long trips. Overnight trips—most likely across to the islands. You Northerners don't seem to realize that the closest of the Bahamas is much nearer to Florida than Cuba—not ninety miles away. It's less than sixty miles from Miami to Bimini and only about seventy from Palm Beach to the western tip of Grand Bahama Island. High-speed boats can make the journey in under two hours."

"You don't need to convince me," Nick assured her. "Okay, I'll try for Marc Watson's teabag. Does he dine at the Landsmen's Club every night?"

She thought about it. "No, only once a week or so. But if I'm right about Seymour and the whole operation they'll need someone to take his place until he reappears—if he reappears. Watson has a good fast boat to make the crossing. If I had to bet on it, I'd say the odds are he'll be dining at Landsmen's tonight."

Mildred Fargo would have won her bet.

After studying several photographs of Marc Watson, Nick had no trouble picking him out as he entered the Landsmen's Club shortly after seven o'clock in the company of a lovely young woman with curly red hair and a figure that turned the head of every man in the club lobby. Nick had again entered through the employees' door. Since Watson had never seen him, stealing the used teabag would present no problem at all.

Donning one of the white jackets the busboys wore, Nick made a quick trip through the dining room, picking up a tray of dirty glasses. He was careful to avoid the real busboys. When one waiter passed him and asked, "You new here?" he merely grunted.

He watched from a distance as Marc Watson and the redheaded woman finished their dinner, then moved in close in order to hear the stocky man order his tea.

"Two coffees, please," Watson told the waiter.

Nick felt as if the floor had dropped out from under him. Before he could react, a passing waiter said to him, "You workin' here or what? If you're workin', grab a tray."

Nick obeyed and hurried out to the kitchen. He couldn't risk more than one more trip to the dining room. Most of the other busboys were Cuban and sooner or later his appearance would attract attention. But he had to see Watson drinking that coffee.

He tried it one more time, reaching the table just as the waiter was setting down two cups. "The chef thought you might prefer tea this evening, sir. He says it's your favorite blend."

"Fine," Watson said.

Nick retreated to the kitchen area, where trays of dirty dishes were waiting to be unloaded into the dishwasher. He spotted a used teabag on one saucer and quickly put it in his pocket.

Back in the dining room he waited until the time was exactly right, then moved in to Marc Watson's table to collect the cups and saucers. "Just a minute!" Watson barked. "We're not finished yet!"

"Sorry, sir," Nick fumbled and moved away.

He retreated to the kitchen with Watson's teabag in his pocket. Making the switch of teabags had been easy, and with luck Watson wouldn't find anything amiss until he inspected the other teabag at his leisure later that evening.

Nick didn't stop to remove his white jacket. He cut quickly through the kitchen and was on his way out the back door when he ran into a familiar figure.

"Well, well," Seymour Bentley said. "Who have we here? It's Millie's friend Nick Velvet, isn't it? And wearing a busboy's jacket."

"I thought you were dead," Nick said lamely.

"I got lucky—which is more than you seem to have done."

His right hand slid inside his jacket and Nick didn't wait for anything else. His fist flew at Bentley's jaw in a single solid blow. Caught off guard, the taller man toppled backward and went down. Nick sprinted to his car. As he started the engine he heard a shout, but he stepped on the gas pedal and didn't look back. If Seymour Bentley had a gun, he chose not to fire it.

Nick announced himself over the downstairs speaker in Mildred Fargo's condominium and waited for her to buzz him in. Upstairs, he found her waiting at her open door when he stepped off the elevator. She was clad in a trailing white lounging robe.

"Did you get it?" she asked.

"Right here." He slipped the handkerchief from his pocket and unwrapped the still damp teabag.

She smiled down at it, then took a thick envelope from the desk and placed it on the cocktail table. "That's your money. Now let's see what we've got."

Very carefully she sliced open the bag with a razor blade and dumped the tea leaves onto a paper towel. "There should be some-

thing—" Her voice trailed off as she separated the leaves with the edge of the razor.

"What is it?"

"There's nothing here but tea leaves! Are you certain you stole the right bag?"

"It's right from Marc Watson's saucer. He ordered coffee at first but the waiter brought him tea. It has to be the bag you want."

"I'm not paying twenty-five thousand dollars for some *tea leaves*!" Her hand moved toward the envelope but Nick was a split-second faster.

"I'm hired to steal worthless things, and that's what I did. Now that you've got it, if it really is worthless that's your problem."

"Gloria said you could be trusted."

"That's true. But I'm not running a charity."

"But—"

"By the way, you were right about Seymour Bentley being alive. I met him as I was leaving the club. He tried to pull a gun on me and I slugged him."

"You what?"

"I had no choice. He was coming in the employees' entrance as I was going out."

"That's odd. Why should he come in the back way?"

"To avoid being seen, I suppose. Maybe he still wants people to think he's dead. Everyone except Graham Jennings, that is—assuming he was on his way to see Jennings."

She looked down dispiritedly at the tea again. "Do you have any ideas about this?"

"I'm not paid for ideas, only for stealing."

"Damn you," she muttered.

"If there's nothing in the teabag itself," Nick ventured, "what about that little pasteboard attached to it?"

"That's just the brand name—" She stopped suddenly, staring at the square label between her fingers. "You may be right. Something could be written here in invisible ink. But how can we tell?"

"Heat might bring it out. Or—"

"Tea!" The thought came to them both simultaneously. Nick had stolen the bag before Marc Watson had had an opportunity to dip the label into his cup.

Millie quickly heated some water and dropped in a teabag of her own. When the tea was strong enough Nick plunged the little paste-

board square into it. They held their breath and studied it, and as they watched some tiny printing appear along one edge.

"Jarret's Cove," Nick read. "Does that mean anything to you?"

She nodded. "It's down the bay a bit. A perfect place to unload narcotics. But this doesn't say when."

"You told me Bentley and Watson always took their boats out the following day. A trip across to the Bahamas and back would make it late tomorrow sometime. Probably after dark."

"There are dozens of coves and capes and islands where they might land. That's why it's so hard to catch them."

Nick glanced at her oddly and said, "I think I'd better take my money and go."

"I—"

"If you're working with the police I don't want to know about it. And if you're planning to hijack the shipment I want to know about it even less."

"All right," she said. "Thank you for what you've done."

He slid the envelope into his pocket, went for the door, and opened it. And got his next surprise.

Seymour Bentley was standing outside with another man Nick had never seen before. Both of them were holding guns. Bentley smiled and pointed his pistol at Nick's chest. "We were just about to knock," he said.

A few minutes later Nick and Mildred were seated side by side, their wrists tied behind their backs, and Seymour Bentley was holding the stolen teabag. "She's a detective, you know," he told Nick. "They've been trying to get me for years, but they never quite succeed."

"I didn't realize the law could afford my fees," Nick said.

"The government keeps a special fund, financed by the sale of cars, boats, and planes they seize from drug-runners. Isn't that right, Millie?"

She tossed her head. "You seem to know all the answers, Seymour."

He turned to the man at his side. "Can we get them out to the car without being seen, Otto?"

"Sure." Otto was a burly man of few words.

"Would you mind telling me how you worked that trick with the burning boat?" Mildred asked. Nick thought she might be stalling for time.

"I built a false superstructure of plywood over the real one. It changed the whole silhouette of the yacht, made it look like a different vessel completely. That's why I wouldn't let you board her the other night. But you tipped off the Coast Guard anyway and they were waiting when I sailed out the next morning on my way to Bimini. I set off a smoke generator and under cover of the smoke screen we dismantled the plywood superstructure, set it on fire, and tossed it overboard. By the time the smoke cleared we were a mile away, appearing to be a different boat entirely. The Coast Guard thought we sank."

"But where do you hide the drugs? Why don't they ever find them when they do stop you?"

"Let's get moving," Otto said.

Bentley agreed. "On your feet, both of you. I'll answer your question before we kill you, Millie," he added. "I wouldn't want you to die in ignorance."

Otto draped their raincoats over their shoulders so that their bound wrists couldn't be seen and led them down to a parked car. Seymour followed along, reminding them there was a gun pointed at them through his jacket pocket.

"I'm sorry I got you into this," Mildred told Nick. "Gloria will never forgive me."

"It's part of the business," he said.

"I don't much like ending up as one more body in the Miami drug wars. I should have known after you had your run-in with Seymour that he'd come for me right away."

Bentley crowded into the back seat with them and Otto drove. They were silent much of the way, driving south on roads little traveled by night. "This is the way to Jarret's Cove," Mildred said.

"That's right," Seymour said. "I told Jennings that invisible writing was unnecessarily melodramatic, but he wanted to avoid any direct contact between himself and the boat skippers."

"So the Landsmen's Club is merely a front for narcotics smuggling."

"No, no—it's quite legitimate. Jennings simply recruited some of us with fast boats and a yen for ready cash."

They turned onto a dirt road that ran east toward the bay. There were marshes all around them now, and in the darkness Nick could see nothing but the swampy vegetation that lined the road, caught briefly in the car's headlights as they sped along. Then "We're here," Otto announced suddenly and stopped the car.

Bentley prodded Nick with the gun. "Out," he said.

During the journey Nick had managed to free his hands from the bonds, but he kept them behind his back. Bentley kept Millie and Nick covered while Otto opened the trunk and took out an automatic rifle. "They're going to kill us now," Millie said under her breath.

Nick couldn't risk waiting any longer. He leapt at Otto, trying to grab the rifle and swing it around at Bentley. It should have been a simple maneuver, but the weapon was coated with cosmoline and it slipped from his grasp, falling to the road. As he and Otto both grabbed for it Bentley fired two quick shots in their direction. Nick dove for the reeds and Otto retrieved the weapon, spraying a burst of bullets into the swamp.

"We still have the girl!" Seymour shouted. "If you bring the police she'll be the first one to die!"

Nick lay very still, the muddy water soaking his clothes. He wondered why they didn't come after him, but then he heard Otto chuckle and say, "Come on—leave him to the alligators."

After a time, when Nick was sure they'd moved on, he started crawling toward the road. The car was still there but he didn't go near it. There was no way to turn it around on the narrow road, even if he could start it, without attracting gunfire.

But with him missing they might keep Mildred alive as a hostage, at least until they finished the run to the islands and back. And as long as she was alive he had a chance of rescuing her.

Not with the police, though. Bentley had meant it when he said she'd be the first to die.

Nick spent the next two hours trudging along the dirt road back to civilization, now and then dodging into the swamp when a car's headlights appeared. He couldn't risk stopping anyone for help on this road, which led only to Jarret's Cove.

Finally, on the main highway a truck driver picked him up and took him to an all-night lunch counter where he found a telephone. The second call he made was to Gloria back at the hotel. After he assured her he was all right he instructed her to telephone the police at six in the morning, just before sunrise, and tell them to come to Jarret's Cove. Allowing for the time it would take them, he figured he couldn't wait any later than that.

It was after five by the time he made his way back to the Cove, walking quite openly down the road toward a few spots of light he could see glowing near the shore. It was Otto who spotted him first,

though there were some twenty men nearby moving bales and boxes. The big man lifted his automatic rifle as if to fire, but Nick raised his hands and said, "Take me to Seymour Bentley."

Otto gave his customary chuckle. "Had enough of the alligators, eh? All right, come on—but no tricks."

Bentley was on board his yacht, chatting in the dull predawn glow with Marc Watson. There was another craft anchored nearby Nick assumed belonged to Watson. He wondered which of them would be making the next run across to the islands.

"I recognize him!" Watson said as Otto led Nick up to them. "He was a busboy at the club!"

"Right," Bentley said. "He stole the teabag for Millie."

"Where is she?" Nick asked.

"At the bottom of the bay."

"I don't believe that—you wouldn't have killed her while there was a chance I'd come back here with the police," Nick bluffed.

"I'm here!" a voice called from inside the cabin. "I'm all right!"

Bentley smiled. "It matters little. Now you'll both be at the bottom of the bay together. Tie his hands, Otto, and do a good job this time."

The eastern sky was glowing now, and Nick noted that the sun would be rising soon. They'd be leaving then, in one yacht or two, and there'd no longer be a reason to keep witnesses alive. "One more trip across?" Nick asked with a smile. "A big one this time?"

"The biggest," Seymour agreed. "Both boats loaded. Once we get back here with it we'll be able to retire for life."

Suddenly there was a shout from the road. "Car coming!"

"The police!" Watson gasped. "He called the police!"

Bentley sprang into action. "Prepare to cast off."

But even as he spoke two small boats rounded the point and headed into Jarret's Cove. Nick could see others in the distance. A man came running up. "There must be five or six cars on the road now, parked every which way! They got us blocked in!"

"And more boats!" Watson shouted, pointing out to sea. He turned to Bentley. "Tell the men to start firing!"

But Seymour Bentley had lifted a pair of binoculars to his eyes. "They don't seem to be armed," he said. "They're just watching."

"Watching?"

"Through binoculars. One has a telescope. They're scanning the shoreline."

"Then dump Velvet and the girl overboard and let's make a run for it!"

Bentley shook his head. "Those boats could radio the Coast Guard before we even clear the cove."

Nick stole a look at his watch. It was just after six, and in the distance he could hear the familiar thump of a helicopter motor. It came into view then, and he smiled. Gloria hadn't quite waited till six o'clock to make her call.

With the road blocked by cars and the cove rapidly filling with boats, Bentley and the others had no way out. Some of them took to the swamps, but the others surrendered without firing a shot when the Coast Guard and federal agents moved in. Nick told Mildred Fargo about it as he untied her.

"I simply called the Birdwatchers' Hotline—the phone number I'd noticed on the club bulletin board a couple of times. I got somebody out of bed and told him I was calling for Marc Watson, and that Watson had sighted a rare Glaucous Gull a thousand miles south of its natural habitat, in Jarret's Cove. I knew the word would bring out some birdwatchers, but I hardly expected such an overflow crowd. The police would have just caused a lot of shooting. This way, Bentley and Watson didn't know what to do."

Mildred rubbed her wrists. "You're quite a guy, Nick. I guess you're worth that twenty-five thousand, one way or another."

"And you *are* with the police?"

"Justice Department. I'm sorry I had to deceive Gloria all this time. We've been trying to get something on Bentley for years. But I suppose even now we'll never know for sure where he hid the narcotics on all those trips across."

Nick smiled. "I said earlier I'd try to steal the teabag through misdirection. That was what Bentley and the others have been using all this time—misdirection! The Coast Guard could never find narcotics on his trips back because there were no narcotics. The rumors that he smuggled narcotics were probably started by Bentley himself."

"What do you mean?"

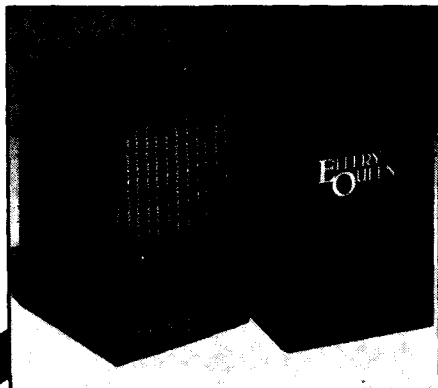
"It was on the trip *out* from Florida that he used the smoke-screen trick and pretended to burn the boat! It was on the trips *out*, not back, that he had something to fear. When I grabbed for Otto's rifle earlier it was coated with cosmoline, freshly unpacked. They weren't smuggling drugs into Florida—they were smuggling guns out of Florida, to those Caribbean islands."

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EXTRA INCOME! \$500 + weekly at home in spare time: easy, guaranteed. Free details. Darby & Sons, POB 6946-D, Chicago, 60680.

ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE NOVEMBER 1982—159

Classified Continued

MONEYMAKING OPPORTUNITIES—Cont'd

UNPARALLELED MONEYMAKING FACTS. Never before revealed. Rush name for free details to: Straight Talk, P.O. Box 711, Lewiston, Maine 04240.

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CABLE TV DESCRAMBLERS and **CONVERTERS. PLANS** and **PARTS.** Build or buy. For information send \$2.00. C&D Electronics, P.O. Box 21, Jenison, MI 49428.

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POEMS WANTED. Songs recorded and published. Radio-TV promotions. Broadway Music Productions, Box 7438-DA, Sarasota, FL 33578.

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SONGWRITERS. The Guild was organized 28 years ago to help writers produce good songs and sell them. National Songwriters Guild, 2421 Walnut Rd., Pontiac, MI 48057.

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FOUR U.S. PLATE BLOCKS over twenty years old. \$1.00 to approval applicants only. Littleflower, RR 1, Box 118D, Osceola, WI 53020.

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(PLEASE PRINT OR TYPE)

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Only \$27.00 for 20 Words or Less
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Capitalized words add—40¢ per word

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(11) \$27.00	(12) \$27.00	(13) \$27.00	(14) \$27.00	(15) \$27.00
(16) \$27.00	(17) \$27.00	(18) \$27.00	(19) \$27.00	(20) \$27.00
(21) \$28.35	(22) \$28.70	(23) \$31.05	(24) \$32.40	(25) \$33.75
(26) \$35.10	(27) \$36.45	(28) \$37.80	(29) \$39.15	(30) \$40.50

HOW TO COUNT WORDS: Name and address must be included in counting the number of Words in your ad. Each initial or number counts as 1 word; Mark Holly, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017; 7 WORDS. Zip codes are not counted; Phone #: 2 Words. Symbols used as keys are charged for; City or State count as 1 word each; Garden City, New York; 2 words. Abbreviations such as C.O.D., F.O.B., P.O., U.S.A., 7x10, 35mm count as 1 word. (P.O. Box 145 count as 3 words) Webster's International Unabridged Dictionary will be used as our authority for spelling, compound words, hyphens, abbreviations, etc. **Please make checks payable to ELLERY QUEEN MAGAZINE**

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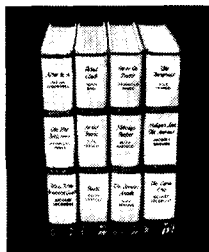
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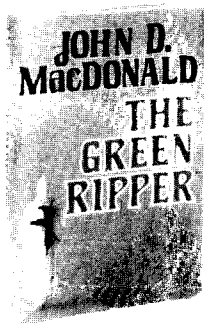
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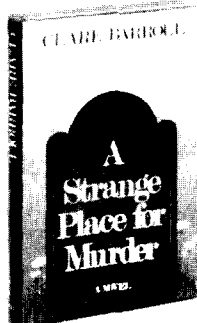
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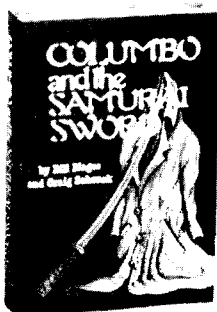
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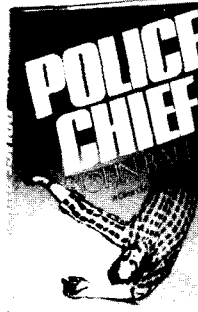
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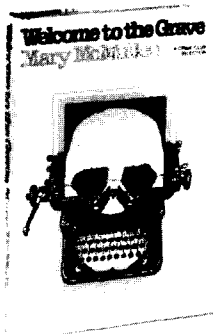
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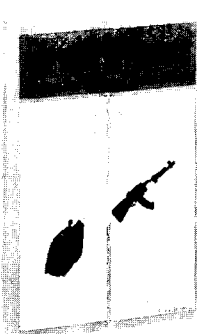
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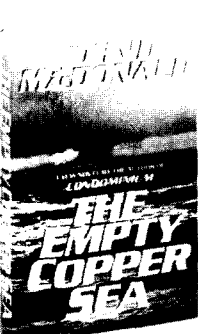
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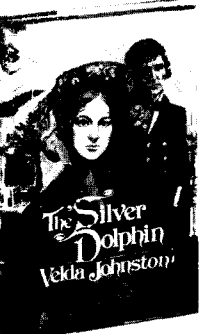
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